The Distribution of Ergative *in*

In this squib I examine the distribution of the ergative case marker *in* in Kuki-Thaadow. Ergative *in*, as its name suggests, marks only subjects of transitive verbs (A arguments, in Dixon’s terminology), yet it does not mark all transitive subjects; being an A is thus a necessary but not a sufficient condition for *in*-marking. Closer examination reveals that the distribution of *in* is regulated by clause type and by the presence of person agreement on the verb. When person agreement is absent, A’s may not be marked with *in*; in such cases, either (i) the A immediately precedes the verb (in its stem 2 form) or (ii) the A appears in a separate clause headed by the “clefting” predicate *a hii*, which is intransitive and does not allow *in*-marking of its argument. The study of *in* is thus intimately tied to the study of KT clause structure. Only by looking at different clause types and patterns of agreement may we understand the conditions on *in*-marking.

1. KT Clause Structure

Before turning to an examination of *in* itself, we must establish some of the basics of KT clause structure. I restrict the discussion here to transitive clauses, as they most clearly demonstrate the differences that are crucial for *in*-marking (and because only they have arguments that may be marked with *in* in the first place). I distinguish between two major types of transitive clause: (i) thematically complete clauses, in which both arguments of the verb are expressed within a single clause, and (ii) thematically incomplete clauses, in which one argument
of the verb is missing and occurs instead in a separate clause headed by *a hii*. The two clause types are shown in (1) and (2), with the clauses in question enclosed in brackets (numerals in verb glosses indicate stem type).

(1) **Thematically complete clauses**

a. \([kÈEl in zÔOng á- pÈt] ëe\)
goat ERG monkey 3SG bite.1 DECL (= declarative marker?)
‘the goat is biting the monkey’

b. \([kÈEl in zÔOng á- pÈE] á- hîi\)
goat ERG monkey 3SG bite.2 3SG be
‘the goat is biting the monkey’

(2) **Thematically incomplete clauses**

a. \([kÈEl in á- pÈE] zÔOng á- hîi\)
goat ERG 3SG bite.2 monkey 3SG be
‘the goat is biting the monkey’ / ‘it’s the monkey that the goat is biting’

b. \(zÔOng á- hîi [kÈEl in á- pÈE]\)
monkey 3SG be goat ERG 3SG bite.2
‘the goat is biting the monkey’ / ‘it’s the monkey that the goat is biting’

KT clause structure is strongly head-final, and so in thematically complete clauses both arguments occur to the left of the verb, as in (1). In thematically incomplete clauses, only one argument occurs to the left of the verb; the other argument occurs in a separate clause, which may appear either to the right (2a) or to the left (2b) of the thematically incomplete clause.¹ Note that, though (2a) could in principle be analyzed as a thematically complete clause with SVO word order, the permutability of the *a hii* clause (as shown in (2b)) argues against this; likewise, it is impossible to place the subject after the verb (yielding OVS word order): *zÔOng á pÈE kÈEl in á hîi*. All of this supports the conclusion that KT clauses are uniformly head-final.

Evidence for the biclausal structure proposed here comes from person agreement, as shown in (3).

¹ Though (2) shows only subjects in the thematically incomplete clauses, objects may also occur in them, with the subject “removed” and placed in an *a hii* clause. Sentences of this type will be discussed below.
The order of clauses in (3) may be inverted along the lines shown in (2). These examples show that agreement on a hii is triggered by the noun that immediately precedes it. Likewise, (3c) shows that 2nd-person subject agreement is infelicitous in the thematically incomplete clause, as the subject is missing from the clause. If we adopt the standard assumption that agreement is clause-bounded, then the agreement facts in (3) strongly suggest that the main verb (i.e., the lexical verb ‘bite’) and a hii head distinct clauses. The thematically complete clause shown in (4) provides additional evidence for the clause-boundedness of agreement.

In (4), a hii agrees with neither the 2nd-person subject nor the 1st-person object, as these are both contained within the thematically complete clause headed by pÊE. Instead, we see default 3rd-person marking, presumably signaling agreement with the entire preceding clause. We thus have two strong pieces of evidence that thematically incomplete clauses exist and that the sentences they occur in are biclausal: (i) the permutability of thematically incomplete clauses with the a hii clauses that accompany them, and (ii) the agreement facts noted in (3) and (4).

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2 It is possible that this infelicity is attributable principally to information structure. It would be quite awkward to employ the focusing effect of the a hii cleft, which picks out the subject of the biting event in (3c), if one already knew who the subject was (as would be indicated if we used the 2subj marker along with the 1obj marker here).
2. Presence vs. Absence of Person Agreement

As noted in the introduction, the occurrence of ergative in is closely tied to the presence of person agreement on the verb. When there is no person agreement on the verb, in must be absent, as well. To begin, we may note that thematically complete clauses like those shown in (1) obligatorily show person agreement on the main verb. The A argument in a thematically complete clause is therefore always marked with in. The word order of the subject and object may be permuted—that is, SOV and OSV are both possible—but in both cases the subject (A) is marked with in. This is true even in clauses with 3rd-person subjects and 1st-person objects, where there appears to be no overt marking of the subject, as in (5).

(5) [kÈEl in i- pÈE] á- hii
       goat   ERG 1OBJ bite.2 3SG be
       ‘the goat is biting me’

Omission of in in (5) leads to a reversal in meaning: ‘we (dual incl.) are biting the goat.’ For the remainder of this section, therefore, we will look only at thematically incomplete clauses, as these are the only clauses in which person agreement may be dropped and thus the only clauses in which A arguments may appear without ergative in.

In thematically incomplete clauses, only one argument of the transitive main verb is retained. There is a strict correlation between the argument retained and the stem type of the verb: objects go with stem 1, and subjects go with stem 2. The difference is shown in the minimal pair in (6), in which the thematically incomplete clause contains no overt NP, but only a personal agreement prefix; the other argument has been clefted into the a hii clause.

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3 One could argue that the 3rd-person subject is marked here, but that vowel coalescence causes it to disappear. Proportional analogy to 2nd-person subject marking yields the following schema: na (2subj) : ni (2subj.1obj) :: a (3subj) : X (3subj.1obj), where X is realized as i. If the correct generalization is that the subject marker retains only its onset consonant when it combines with the 1st-person object marker i, then i is the expected realization for 3subj.1obj. This generalization also holds for the reflexive marker ki, which appears to be a combination of the subj ka and 1obj i.
When a full NP is present in the thematically incomplete clause, two options are available: (i) the verb may contain a personal agreement prefix, in which case an A argument (which goes with stem 2) must be marked with *in* while an O argument (stem 1) must not be, or (ii) the NP may immediately precede the verb, with no other morphemes intervening. These two options are shown in (7) and (8) for A’s and O’s, respectively.

(7)  Thematically incomplete clause with A argument

a. kÊEl á- hïi [zÔOng in á- pÊE]
goat 3SG be monkey ERG 3SG bite.2
‘the monkey is biting the goat’ / ‘it’s the goat that the monkey is biting’

b. kÊEl á- hïi [zÔOng pÊE]
goat 3SG be monkey bite.2
‘the monkey is biting the goat’ / ‘it’s the goat that the monkey is biting’

(8)  Thematically incomplete clause with O argument

a. kÊEl á- hïi [zÔOng á- pÊt]
goat 3SG be monkey 3SG bite.1
‘the goat is biting the monkey’ / ‘it’s the goat that’s biting the monkey’

b. kÊEl á- hïi [zÔOng pÊt]
goat 3SG be monkey bite.1
‘the goat is biting the monkey’ / ‘it’s the goat that’s biting the monkey’

In thematically incomplete clauses, *in*-marking is limited to sentences like (7a), in which there is personal agreement on the verb. The argument of *a hii* never takes *in*, even when the A is

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4 The sentence in (8a) was not actually elicited, but was constructed based on analogy to other sentences (specifically, interrogatives, which also appear to contain thematically incomplete clauses of the type discussed here) in which personal agreement marking on a stem 1 verb was optionally present, and for which the informant claimed that such marking referred to the object (the monkey, in this case). In further elicitation, I will test the grammaticality of this particular sentence.
clefted as in (8), as the clefting predicate is intransitive. Ergative in-marking is thus limited to (i)
thematically complete clauses and (ii) thematically incomplete clauses in which there is personal
agreement marking on a stem-2 verb.

The distribution of in is the same in interrogative clauses, which consist either of a
thematically complete clause plus the interrogative marker ham (9a), or a thematically
incomplete clause plus a clause headed by ham (9b and 9c).

(9) a. \[zÔOng \textbf{in} \text{n} \text{KÔ}y \text{-} \text{pÈE}\] hâm?
   monkey ERG who 3SG bite.2 INTERR.
   ‘who is the monkey biting?’

   b. \[zÔOng \textbf{in} \text{à} \text{pÈE}\] kÔy hâm?
   monkey ERG 3SG bite.2 who INTERR.
   ‘who is the monkey biting?’

   c. \[zÔOng \text{pÈE}\] kÔy hâm?
   monkey bite.2 who INTERR.
   ‘who is the monkey biting?’

The data in this section show that A arguments fail to receive in-marking only when they
occur in thematically incomplete clauses in which no personal agreement marking is present on
the verb (which must, of course, be in its stem 2 form).

3. Clauses as Modifiers

Thematically incomplete clauses of both types—i.e., both with and without personal
agreement marking—may occur as prenominal modifiers, as seen when we examine relative
clauses. Relative clauses are always thematically incomplete. Ergative in-marking in the relative
clause obeys precisely the restrictions noted above. Consider the examples in (10) (elicited by
Anne and Marc).
(10) a. \[kÈEl in á- pÈE\] (pàa) zÒOng á- hlùu ēe
      goat  ERG  3SG  bite.2  REL  monkey 3SG  fall  DECL
      ‘the monkey whom the goat is biting is falling’

      b. \[zÒOng  pÉE\]  kÈEl  ìn  â-  nÉE  īe
      monkey  bite.2  goat  ERG  3SG  eat.1  DECL
      ‘the goat whom the monkey is biting is eating’

In (10a), the relative clause contains personal agreement marking on the verb, and so ergative \textit{in} is present on the A argument, as expected. In (10b), there is no agreement, and no \textit{in}. (I do not know whether one can insert the relativizer \textit{paa} between \textit{pÈE} and \textit{kÈEl} in this example; this is a question for further research.) Furthermore, the matrix clause of (10b) shows the regular pattern of \textit{in}-marking for an A argument in a thematically complete clause. The relative clause facts therefore support the generalization about \textit{in}-marking noted above: in thematically incomplete clauses, \textit{in}-marking occurs only when the stem-2 verb contains a personal agreement prefix.

4. Conclusion

I have identified three conditions on the distribution of ergative \textit{in}: (i) it must mark the A argument of a transitive verb, (ii) the verb must show personal agreement marking, and (iii) if it occurs in a thematically incomplete clause, the verb must occur in its stem 2 form. The distribution of ergative \textit{in} is thus closely linked both to clause type and to the presence of agreement marking. The deeper causes behind this distribution remain uncertain, especially the correlation with personal agreement marking. It is possible that verbs without agreement marking behave syntactically more like nouns than like verbs. The internal syntax of these structures is certainly similar to that of ordinary noun phrases: compare zÒOng pÈE kÈEl ‘the goat whom the monkey bites’ to zÒOng hÓy kÈEl ‘the beautiful monkey’s goat.’ The external syntactic distribution of such phrases is a topic for future research. In any case, by endeavoring
to determine the full distribution of ergative in, we have learned much about personal agreement marking in KT and have uncovered a major dichotomy among transitive clause types in the language. The clause structures proposed here—thematic completeness vs. thematically incomplete—may be tested against future data, and hopefully will help to illuminate further details of KT clause structure.