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► **To cite this version:**

Ellison Luk, Maïa Ponsonnet. Discourse and Pragmatic Functions of the Dalabon 'Ergative' Case-marker. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 2019, 39, pp.287 - 328. 10.1080/07268602.2019.1623758 . hal-03807420

HAL Id: hal-03807420

<https://hal.science/hal-03807420v1>

Submitted on 2 Dec 2022

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Discourse and pragmatic functions of the Dalabon “ergative” case marker

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Luk, Ellison and Maïa Ponsonnet. 2019. Discourse and pragmatic functions of the Dalabon 'ergative' case-marker. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 39(3):287-328.

Abstract

This article discusses the distribution and function of a suffix that has been labelled “ergative” in the literature on Dalabon, a Gunwinyguan (non-Pama-Nyungan) language of southwestern Arnhem Land. Our first-hand data reveals that although this marker (-*yih*) more frequently occurs on A arguments of multivalent clauses, it also appears with significant frequency on S arguments of monovalent clauses, particularly with the verb root *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’. We explain this non-canonical distribution with a co-dependent analysis of its discourse and pragmatic functions, summarised by the principle “mark out the unexpected referent”, following McGregor’s Expected Actor Principle (1998:516). These functions differ slightly according to clause type. For both types, the marker has a discourse function of “mark out the non-topical referent”: either an A argument that sufficiently threatens the construal of local topics, or a S referent after a long period of deferred topichood (particularly speaker referents). The marker also has a correlating pragmatic function of “mark out the contrary referent”: either an A participant acting against the motivations and expectations of other (topical) referents (or of the speaker), or an S participant with an unusual stance or speech content.

Keywords

Gunwinyguan, optional ergative, case marking, information structure, topicality, pragmatics, transitivity, nominal reference

Word Count

13346 words

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1. Introduction

This paper offers an analysis of what has previously described as an “optional ergative marker” in Dalabon, a critically endangered language spoken in south-western Arnhem Land in the northern part of the Australian continent. Dalabon belongs to the Gunwinyguan family, a relatively large non-Pama-Nyungan family that includes, among others, the Bininj Gun-wok dialect chain (Dalabon’s closest relative, Evans 2003), Rembarrnga (McKay 1978; Saulwick 2007), Ngalakgan (Merlan 1983; Baker 2008) and Jawoyn (Merlan & Jacq 2005a; 2005b). Dalabon has just about half a dozen fluent or semi-fluent speakers all above the age of sixty, and has been replaced by Kriol (an English-based creole, see Schultze-Berndt et al. (2013), Ponsonnet (2010)) and Bininj Gun-wok (Ponsonnet 2015; n.d.). Female Dalabon speakers, in particular the chief consultant †Maggie Ngarridjdan Tukumba have been very active in documenting their language in collaboration with linguists. The literature on Dalabon is now relatively extensive, including a dictionary (Evans, Merlan & Tukumba 2004), a monograph (Ponsonnet 2014a), two PhD theses (Ross 2011; Cutfield 2011) and a number of descriptive articles (see §2.1).

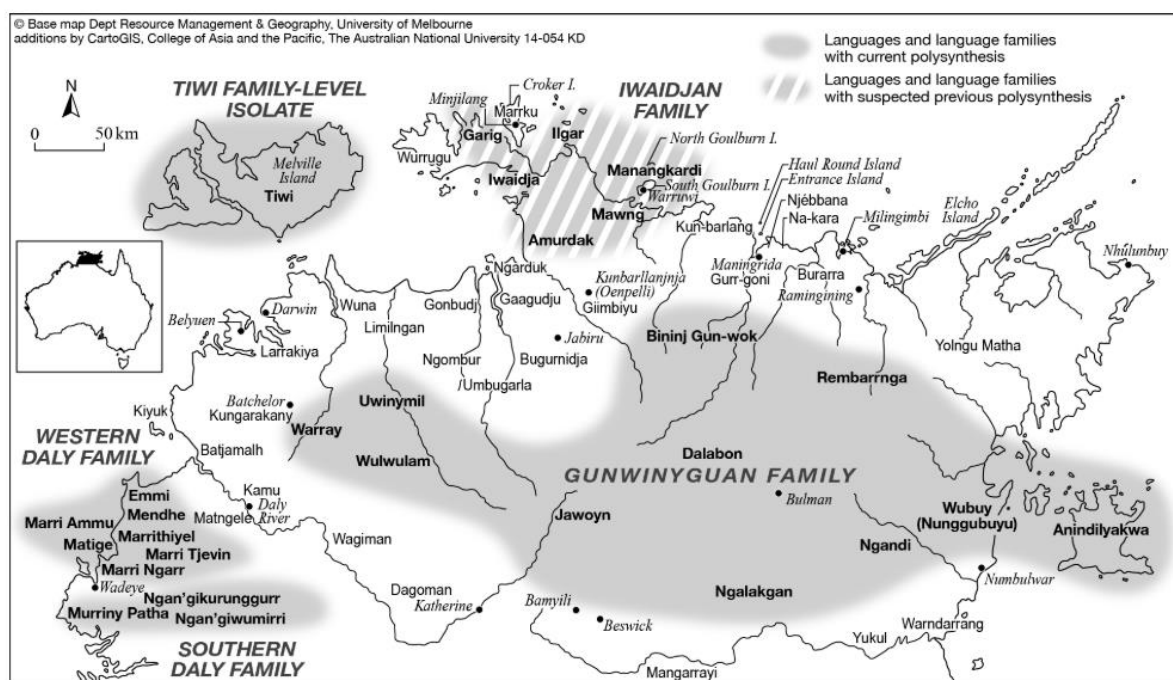


Figure 1: Map of polysynthetic languages and the Gunwinyguan family in northern Australia (Evans 2017: 313)

Authors have described Dalabon speakers as using an “optional ergative case-marker” (Evans 2017a; Cutfield 2011). Canonically, ergative case-markers mark out the transitive subject (Dixon 1994:16); in Dalabon, the nominal suffix *-yih* can indeed do so, as in example (1).

- (1) 20120707b_000_MT 154 [Car Accident]¹

¹ See Appendix A for list of glossing abbreviations.

154 *wawurd-no-yih* *buka-h-dja-karlang-ka-ninj*
older.brother-3sg.POSS-ERG 3sg>3sg.h-R-FOC-shoulder-take/carry-PP
 “**His older brother** was piggybacking him.”

However, *-yih* is not obligatorily marked on transitive subjects. As is the usual case in Dalabon, the marker can be dropped without affecting the semantic interpretation of the sentence – in example (2), neither of the participants, *na-Ryan* and *kanh Bangardi*, is marked with a case-marker, but *na-Ryan* is still interpreted as the transitive subject (word order does not determine grammatical role).

(2) 20100722b_003_MT 426 [Husband & Wife 1/4]
 426 *mak mahkih kanh na-Ryan kanh buka-yam-i*
 NEG CNJ **D.ID MASC-PN D.ID** 3sg>3sg.h-spear-IRR

kanh Bangardi
D.ID male.subsection.name
 “**Ryan** didn’t spear **this Bangardi**.”

Besides, *-yih* also occurs with more-than-marginal frequency on non-A arguments, namely, intransitive subjects. This is illustrated in example (3), where the verb root *yin* (‘to say, to think, to do’) is formally monovalent (it consistently takes monovalent person prefixes, e.g. *djah-yin* ‘you say’, *balah-yin* ‘they say’, etc., see Evans, Brown, & Corbett, 2001:199).

(3) 20110614_007_LB 049 [Picture Series B]
 049 *ngey mak dja-yolh-weh-wo-y ka-h-yi-n kardu yibung-yih*
 1sg NEG 1sg>2sg-feelings-bad-VBLSR-IRR **3sg-R-say/do-PR** maybe **3sg-ERG**
 “I’m not making you feel bad, **he** could **be thinking**. (I’m making you happy.)”

The label “optional ergative case-marker” has been used as a “wastebasket” category to describe phenomena in languages where the presence or absence of the ergative case-marker could not be explained with reference to purely syntactic factors. Nowadays, typologists and grammarians have a better understanding of optional ergativity as cross-linguistically motivated by consistent discourse and pragmatic principles, owing to typological work starting from the 1990s (see McGregor (1992) on Gooniyandi or LaPolla’s (1995) survey of Tibeto-Burman ergativities) and more recent language-specific publications (Chelliah & Hyslop 2011; Verstraete 2010; Gaby 2010; McGregor 2006; Hyslop 2010; Rumsey 2010; DeLancey 2005; Pensalfini 1999, among many others).

Following these trends, we present the case that the “ergative” case-marker in Dalabon is conditioned by the discourse context, with a significant pragmatic dimension, and that its distribution is probabilistically predicted by a set of preferences, rather than by syntactic rules. In describing the behaviour of *-yih*, we commit to the label “ergative” case-marker, primarily to avoid terminological

confusion with prior sources on Dalabon, but in doing so, we will also enrich its description by evaluating how it is used in managing nominal reference in Dalabon discourse.

In §2, we provide basic facts concerning Dalabon grammar and information structure, as well as the methods used in the article. In §3, we analyse the role of the Dalabon “ergative” marker as it occurs on transitive subjects: a **discourse function** whereby *-yih* marks non-topical agents (§3.1), and a **pragmatic function** where by *-yih* flags the adverse nature of the action described by the clause (§3.2), subsumed under an analysis based on expectedness (§3.3). In §4, we consider the extensions of *-yih* to intransitive subjects: in serialised contexts (§4.1), on clauses headed by the verb *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’ (§4.2 and §4.3), and also occasionally on verbs describing emotions (§4.4). In these contexts, *-yih* has a discourse function of disambiguation, and a pragmatic function of emphasis, flagging the strength of the content of speech and/or the stance of its author. Although a full analysis of the historical developments of all these usages of *-yih* is beyond the scope of this article, in §4.3, we hypothesise that all these usages are extensions from the discourse functions observed on multivalent clauses.

2. Linguistic and methodological background

2.1 Grammatical overview

Like its neighbours and closest relatives Bininj Gun-wok and Rembarnga, Dalabon is overwhelmingly head-marking and polysynthetic (Evans 2017b). Words are formed from long chains of agglutinated morphemes, and clauses typically consist of one or more verb complexes, each obligatorily inflected for the person and number features of core-arguments, tense, aspect and mood (see Evans and Merlan 2003; Evans, Brown, and Corbett 2003; Evans 2006; Evans, Fletcher, and Ross 2008; Ponsonnet 2014a). The Dalabon verb template (summarised in Figure 2) numbers sixteen slots, with three or four strictly obligatory slots. Most verb complexes tend to fill six slots or less, and more than eight is relatively rare. Noun incorporation is extremely productive in Dalabon, as in other Gunwinyguan languages.

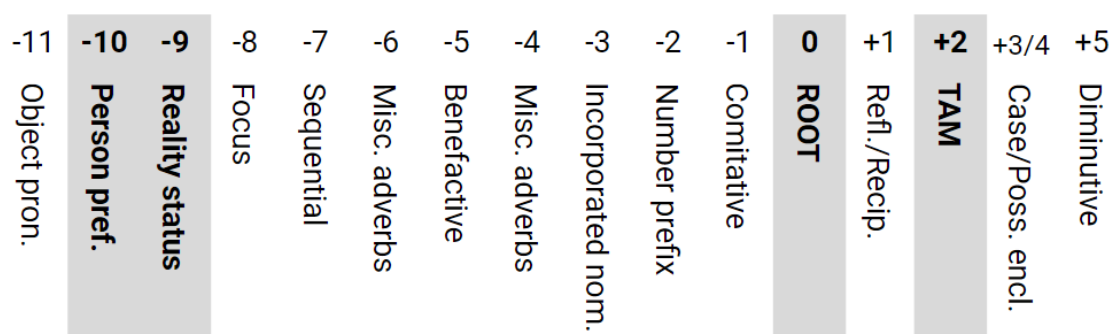


Figure 2: The Dalabon verb template, with each slot labelled (adapted from Ponsonnet 2015). Shading indicates that the slot must be obligatorily filled (slots [-9] and [+2] may be filled by zero morphemes).

In discussing ergative marking, we will pay close attention to argument structure. The valency of Dalabon verbs is lexically specified, with roots subcategorising for up to three arguments. Pronominal coreference can be retrieved from the gloss of the person prefix (slot [-10]): monovalent verbs use prefixes for a single argument, as in example (4), while multivalent verbs use a combination of clitics (slot [-11]), simple prefixes and portmanteau prefixes that encode two arguments (indicated by '>'), as in (5). Bound pronominal reference will be further explained in §2.2.1. Slot [-9] usually hosts *h-* 'realis' (the grapheme ⟨h⟩ represents the glottal stop phoneme) but in some literature is sometimes analysed as an extension of slot [-10]; among others, it alternates with the subordinator *ye-* and irrealis zero.

Incorporated nouns in slot [-3] (Ponsonnet 2015; Evans 2003) relate to the absolutive argument: S for monovalent verbs in (4) and O for multivalent verbs in (5). In these examples the person prefixes still cross-reference the absolutive arguments themselves, not the incorporated nouns, due to their nominal subclass (see Ponsonnet (2015) for further details).

(4) 20110521a_002_MT 030 [EI]

030 *nga-h-dengu-berderde-mu*

1sg-R-foot-ache-PR

“My foot aches (lit. I ache from the foot, I foot-ache).”

(5) 20111206a_003_MT 107 [ContEI]

107 *bim-no-ngu* *dja-h-bim-m-iyān*

picture-FILL-2sgPOSS **1sg>2sg-R-picture-get-FUT**

“I’ll take a photo of you (lit. I’ll take your picture, I’ll picture-take your picture).”

Benefactive and comitative applicative prefixes (slots [–5] and [–1]) increase the valency of the verb root by 1, as in examples (6) and (7). The benefactive *marnu*-² promotes an animate patient adjunct to object argument, while the comitative/instrumental *ye-* promotes a concomitant or instrument adjunct to object core argument under certain circumstances (Ponsonnet n.d.) The reflexive/reciprocal suffix (slot [+1]) decreases the predicate valency by 1, as in example (8).

(6) 20110526b_001_MT 021 [ContEI]

021 *men-mungu* *kanh beka* *buka-h-marnu-m-e*

idea-unintentionally D.ID tobacco 3sg>3sg.h-R-**BEN**-get-PP

“He unintentionally took her tobacco [to her detriment].”

(7) 20100720b_009_MT 077 [Narr]

077 *yila-h-ye-dudj-mu* *wulk-no*

3pl>3sg-R-**COM**-return-PR fat-FILL

“We bring back some fat.”

(8) 20100722b_004_MT 026 – 027 [Husband & Wife 2/4]

026 *Bangarn* *Bangardi*

female.subsection.name male.subsection.name

027 *mararradj barra-h-na-rr-uninj*

lover **3du-R-see-RR-PP**

“Bangarn, Bangardi...**they** were **seeing each other** as lovers.”

On the clause level, word order is non-configurational (Baker & Mushin 2008:4) and is determined pragmatically (see Cutfield 2011:29, 58–79), with noun “phrases” often being discontinuous.

² Also cited as *marnû-*, where ⟨û⟩ represents [i], which has been treated either as phonemic, or as an allophone of /u/. We neutralise the distinction in this paper, and will use ⟨u⟩ throughout (see Ponsonnet 2014a:xxvii).

Generally, the morphological representation of nominal referents is conditioned by informational principles, which we will discuss below in §2.2.2.

2.2 Referring expressions

2.2.1 Bound pronominal prefixes

The morphemes in slots [-11] and [-10] of Figure 2 always encode the person and number features of the core arguments, and in doing so, provide interlocutors with a way to refer to nominal referents in discourse without overt noun phrases. However, there is widespread syncretism among these morphemes (Evans, Brown & Corbett 2001:199), such that when there is syncretism between monovalent and bivalent prefixes, predicate valency cannot be established on the basis of pronominal prefixation alone. *Table 1* shows a subset of Dalabon pronominal prefixes (there are 117 possible combinations); note the behaviour of *ka-*, which can mean ‘3sg’ (intransitive), ‘2sg>1sg’, ‘3sg>1sg’ or ‘3sg>3sg’, and the seemingly absolute behaviour of *dja-* ‘2sg (as S or O)’. The valency will always be clear when slot [-11] is filled (only for non-singular O arguments).

S/A \ O		>1sg	>2sg	>3sg	>1pl	>12pl	>2pl	>3pl
		1sg	<i>nga-</i>		<i>dja-</i>	<i>nga-</i>		
2sg	<i>dja-</i>	<i>ka-</i>		<i>da-</i>	<i>njel ka-</i>			<i>bulu da-</i>
3sg	<i>ka-</i>	<i>ka-</i>	<i>dja-</i>	{ <i>ka-</i> <i>buka-</i>	<i>njel ka-</i>	<i>ngorr ka-</i>	<i>nol ka-</i>	<i>bulu ka-</i>

Table 1: Subset of bound pronominal prefixes for singular S/A referents and some singular and plural O referents (irrealis). Impossible combinations in grey.

An animacy hierarchy manifests on the pronominal morphology in two main ways. First, in trivalent clauses (e.g. verbs of giving, benefactive constructions), only the two highest animate arguments will attain core status and be encoded on the pronominal prefix (see Ponsonnet n.d.). Second, the prefix *buka-* signifies ‘3sg>3sg.h, third-person singular acting on third-person singular high-animate’ (Table 1 in bold): i.e. it is triggered whenever the object relation encodes a human or anthropomorphised participant. This systemic alternation between *ka-* and *buka-* means that (third-person singular) object referents that are human (for one) can be encoded without being referred to within an overt nominal phrase. It also provides a way to refer to those (generally atypical) cases where inanimate referents instigate actions on animate referents. As we will see in §3.2, this has some consequences for our analysis of the “ergative” case-marker.

2.2.2 Generalising nominal reference with information structure

Outside of the verbal complex, Dalabon nominal referents may take a variety of surface representations, from the more overt to the less. We can simplistically describe these representations in

Dalabon with a cline, expressed in Table 2, roughly summarising different ways in which nominal reference can be done.

Less overt	Zero anaphora ³
	Bound pronominal prefix only
	Bound pronominal prefix + demonstrative
More overt	Bound pronominal prefix + free pronoun or common noun (+ demonstrative, or other restrictive reference, e.g. possessor)
	Bound pronominal prefix + any nominal + case-marking or other emphatic affixation

Table 2: Cline summarising different patterns of overtiness in Dalabon nominal reference.

The following examples demonstrate these various overtiness degrees of a nominal referent: (9) zero anaphora of a non-core argument, (10): reference solely through bound pronominal prefix, (11): reference through a standalone demonstrative, and (12): reference through an overt nominal root (with and without demonstratives).

(9) 20110521b_003_MT 106 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]

106 *mak mah ka-h-ngabb-uy*
NEG CNJ **2sg>1sg**-R-give-IRR

“You won’t give [**the fish**] to me.”

(10) 20110521b_003_MT 088 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]

088 *buka-h-dalu-wurrm-ang*
3sg>3sg.h-R-mouth-make.noise-PP

“**He (the jackal)** shouts to **him (the crow)**.”

(11) 20110521b_003_MT 093 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]

093 *mak nunda ka-ye-burlk-a*
NEG **D.here 3sg>3sg**-COM-go.down-PR

“**This one (the crow)** does not come down with it (the fish).”

(12) a. 20110521b_003_MT 127 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]

127 *wakwak kardu ka-h-borlanh-m-e dalu-no-walung*
crow maybe **3sg>3sg**-R-nearly-get-PP mouth-3sg.POSS-ABL

“**The crow** could have caught it (the fish) in his mouth.”

b. 20110521b_003_MT 148 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]

³ This applies virtually only for non-core arguments that get neither pronominal nor applicative representation.

148 *nunda kanhdah kandukun kanh ka-h-lng-ngu-n*
D.here kind.of dingo D.ID 3sg>3sg-R-eat-PR

“**This one here, this dingo, he** then eats it (the fish).”

Referents with emphatic affixes and case markers can be described as more overt than those without. Emphatic affixes include *-karn* (generic emphatic), *-kih* ‘really’, *-wali* ‘in turn’, and *ka-h-dja-* (third-singular predicative with focal), and as we will see, *-yih*, as in example (13).

- (13) a. 20110521b_003_MT 114 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]
 114 *bah buka-h-drahm-inj kanh wakwak-yih*
 CNJ 3sg>3sg.h-R-refuse-PP D.ID crow-**ERG**
 “But the crow refused him (the jackal).”
- b. 20120708b_000_MT 185 [Personal Narrative]
 185 *ka-h-dja-rolu-no-kih-yih⁴ buka-h-ngalk-ang*
3sg-R-FOC-dog-3sg.POSS-really-ERG 3sg>3sg.h-R-find-PP
 “**It was really** his dog that found him.”

Other case-markers such as locative *-kah*, genitive *-kun*, and two ablatives *-be* and *-walung* also seem to be mandated by discourse and pragmatic conditions to some extent. Patientive referents (transitive objects) may attract locative and genitive markers, as in (14), while transitive subjects may be marked by an ablative (not shown, also attested in Jaminjung, Schultze-Berndt 2000:168–169). A full analysis of the behaviour of these case-markers remain topics for future research.

- (14) 20110605_002_LB_ND 041 – 042 [Jackal & Crow (LB_ND)]
 041 *buka-h-naHn-an kanh wakwak*
 3sg>3sg.h-R-look:REDUP-PR D.ID crow
 042 *mmm kanh wakwak-kah*
 INTJ D.ID **crow-LOC**
 “He (the dingo) is looking at the crow...mmm, at the crow.”

Short of a full analysis of information structure and nominal reference, we will show that in Dalabon, the informational status of a nominal referent plays a direct and complex role in how it is morphologically represented. Moreover, we will demonstrate that the employment of *-yih* can be

⁴ *ka-h-dja-* ‘3sg-R-FOC-’ is a predicative prefix that seems to have a similar pragmatic import to the English *it*-cleft construction (and is translated as such). Since the root *rolu* ‘dog’ is a nominal, the entire word is treated as a nominal and can take the full range of nominal suffixes.

directly informed by the *topicality* of referents in a given stretch of discourse.⁵ As a typological label, the *topic* has been defined as an entity within an utterance which “the speaker intends to increase the addressee’s knowledge about, request information about, or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect to” (Gundel 1988:210): it anchors the sentence by governing the scope of the focus. Generally, topical referents are backgrounded and constitute given information, while focussed referents are foregrounded and constitute new information. When describing the informational status of referents in Dalabon, we can correlate a referent’s topicality with the way it is coded (cf. Givón 1983): topical referents tend towards less overt expression, and focussed referents tend towards more overt expression (Van Valin 2005:73). We can distinguish between a topic on the sentence level (the local topic), and a topic on the level of the whole text (the discourse topic, see Lambrecht 1994:117): since they will by default correspond to each other, we will only make a distinction where there is a mismatch (see §3.2).

In the Dalabon corpora, we find that overt noun phrases are employed in establishing and (re)affirming the identity of referents, but less overt forms used to refer to referents that are already established. In these cases, the pronominal prefix on the verb complex alone will supply (or allude to) the identity of the referent, which is then not reiterated outside of the verb complex. Syntactically, the topic preferentially correlates with the subject component (of the bound pronominal) more so than with the object component. Semantically, topics are typically Agents and Experiencers, rather than as Patients and Themes, and are overwhelmingly always human or anthropomorphised. Together with verbal semantics and principles of implicature, these established syntactic and semantic preferences allow overt reference to topical referents to be elided in discourse once they have been established, as the pronominal marking of each verb suffices to identify them (on referential ‘indirectness’, see Garde, 2008 among others). Further, sentences that overtly express two or more referents may be facily parsed by the addressee with no recourse to case-marking; the referent established (or inferred) to be the topic will be taken to be the subject argument and a semantic Agent, and the newer referent will be taken to be in another grammatical role. In practice however, especially with longer stretches of discourse, the topic will be overtly reaffirmed from time to time to keep it active in the minds of the interlocutor.

Referents may be introduced as the topic in many ways in the Dalabon data. In recorded narratives, the topical referent is usually established before the recording begins, with the speaker beginning to talk about the referent without overtly introducing it. In stimulus-based elicitations (see 2.4), it is common for the speaker to refer to the referents on the stimulus screen or pictures through the use of demonstrative pronouns and gesturing. Changing the topic may be as simple as stating the referent outright, often done in a separate intonational pattern, left-dislocated from its first predicate.

⁵ Cutfield undertakes an analysis of discourse–pragmatics in Dalabon (2011:41–113) on the ordering of nominals at the level of the utterance. What we attempt is different in kind and in scope: we are concerned with nominal case-marking at the level of the discourse and as such, our frameworks and usage of meta-language will diverge.

We demonstrate the role of the topic in example (15), taken from the recording “Ten Canoes 2/6”, where the speaker comments on the movie of the same name, about tribal life in an Arnhem Land region in precolonial times (the film features Ganalbinju, and other Yolŋu Matha languages). Here, MT narrates a scene about an encounter between a group of tribesmen, led by the elder *Ridjimirilirl* (the primary topical referent), and a stranger. Morphemes referencing *Ridjimirilirl* are bolded.

(15) 20120710b_003_MT 188 – 198 [Ten Canoes 2/6]

188 ***Ridjimirilirl*** 189 *mak ka-djare-m-ini bula-h---*
 PN NEG **3sg**-want-INCH-IRR 3sg>3pl-R

190 *bula-yam-i* 191 *barl-- bala-h-yam-urrun-i*
 3pl>3sg-spear-IRR 3pl 3pl-R-spear-RR-IRR

“**Ridjimirilirl**, he doesn’t want them to spear him, for them to spear each other.”

192 *bulu ka-h-yinmiwo-ng mak nula-yam-iyam*
 3pl **3sg**>3-R-tell-PP NEG 2pl>3sg-spear-FUT

193 *nula-h-ba-n malung ka-h-yi-ninj*
 2pl>3sg-R-leave-PR firstly **3sg**-R-say-PP

“**He** told them, ‘You mob don’t spear him, leave him unharmed first’ **he** says.”

194 *kenbo ngurra-h-marnu-malkn-iyam*
 then **12pl**>3sg-R-BEN-look.at.from.afar-FUT

195 *kardu ka-h-yawoh-dudjm-iyam kanh-kuno kenbo nula-h---*
 maybe 3sg-R-again-return-FUT D.ID-time then 2pl>3sg-R

“then **you mob and I** will look at him coming in the distance. Maybe he will come back, then at that time, you mob...”

196 *rong nula-h-n-iyam kardu* 197 *bulu ka-h-marnu-yi-ninj*
 target? 2pl>3sg-R-see-FUT maybe 3pl **3sg**>3-R-BEN-say-PP

“‘You mob could take aim at him’, **he** told them.”

(7.6s of silence, watching the film)

198 *buka-h-ngabb-ong kanh*
3sg>3sg.h-R-give-PP D.ID

“He gave (the stranger) some (food).”

The referent *Ridjimirilirl* is established clearly as the matrix topic (in a left-dislocated phrase), being the one issuing commands and making plans; thus, he controls coreference with all clauses relating to these activities. The other participants, the tribesmen and the stranger, are established as topical within the speech content complement; they do not receive overt expression, but can be recovered using the pronominal bound morphemes (plural being coreferential with the tribesmen, singular with the stranger). This illustrates two important points.

Firstly, as discussed above, verbal semantics together with the pronominal bound morphemes can reliably reconstruct coreference without overtly expressing the referents. The stranger is not mentioned, but he is inferred to be the A argument of ‘come back’ in line 195, as the semantics of the clause *kah-yawoh-dudjmiyan* (“he will come back”) preclude the possibility of either *Ridjimirilirl* or the tribesmen being topical. Hence, topics can be maintained without recourse to overt expression, over multiple “tiers” of discourse, as typically happens in reported speech (to be expanded in §4).

Secondly, multiple topics may be active without recourse to overt signalling of their role, but they may not necessarily have the same level of topicality. *Ridjimirilirl* is the matrix topic; as the speaker of an extended reported speech complement, he is the most *backgrounded* and pervasive referent, and exercises subject coreference without needing to be overtly stated in a noun phrase. Within the speech content complement, the tribesmen are more topical than the stranger, since they are the addressees (and hence are more prominent).

The stretch of discourse in example (15) follows the canonical configuration of predicate focus: nominal referents are topical in that their identity can be recovered purely from bound pronominal morphemes, and the predicates themselves are the loci of attention. This configuration is broken when a nominal referent attracts attention by assuming a more overt form (see Table 2), such as a case-marked referent that “upsets” the assumptions held towards the topical referent. As we will show in the next section, referents case-marked with *-yih* often have this quality of disrupting the topichood of referents in discourse.

2.3 Analysing *-yih*

The nominal case-suffix *-yih* has been described in the literature as an “ergative” case-marker. In Capell's (1962) linguistic sketch of the language, the marker (rendered *-ji*) was given the label “operative case (marker)”, to describe its instrumental and agentive usage. Later, the terminology was updated to “ergative” (a similar terminological development can be seen in Alawa by comparing Sharpe's earlier (1972) and later (1976) labels). The entry for *-yih* in the dictionary (Evans, Merlan & Tukumba 2004) records five senses, listed here in the original order:

- two instrumental/comitative senses: “using/with N” and “make with/out of N”

- an agentive/ergative sense: “N did...”, “...done by N”
- a causal sense: “because of N”, and:
- an agentive/ergative sense but used as a subject marker for some intransitive clauses⁶

Examples (16), (17) and (18) illustrate the case-suffix’s *instrumental*, *causal* and *agentive/ergative* senses respectively (case-marked nominal and coreferential pronominal elements in bold). Throughout this article, we will leave aside the non-core senses and focus on the use of *-yih* on core arguments (Van Valin 2005; Andrews 2007:164–165), as shown in example (18). (Note example (17), where the intransitive pronominal prefix *bala-* ‘3pl’ precludes the possibility of interpreting *krok* ‘grog, alcohol’ as an Agent.)

(16) 20120710b_003_MT 277 [Ten Canoes 2/6]

277 *buka-h-Ing-waral-b-uninj* ***kanh danj-yih***
 3sg>3sg.h-R-SEQ-spirit-hit/kill-PP **D.ID spear-INSTR**

“He struck his spirit **with a spear.**”

(17) 20120706b_002_MT 017 [Narrative about drinking practices]

017 *bala-h-Ing-wurh-wurh-m-inji* ***kanh krok-yih*** *kahnunh*
 3pl-R-SEQ-feel.hot:REDUP-INCH-PI **D.ID grog-INSTR** D.ID

“**The grog (alcohol)** had warmed them up.” (lit. “They had gotten warm **from the grog.**”)

(18) 20110519b_001_LB_ND 050 [Narrative about the Stolen Generation]

050 ***warhdu-yih*** *bulu ka-h-k-ang* *balay*
white.person-ERG 3pl 3sg>3-R-take/carry-PP far

“**The white people** took them far away.”

Prior attempts to explain the sporadic distribution of *-yih* have appealed to its role of disambiguating referents: to single out the subject or agentive referent in clauses where there may be ambiguity (compare Evans 2003:139 for Biniŋ Gun-wok), particularly when it is a low-animate referent (Cutfield 2011:83–84). While disambiguation and animacy may *appear* at first sight to be the primary functions of *-yih* (see §4.2.1), we offer a more exhaustive explanation with respect to the following three interwoven functions. Canonically, the ergative case-marker has a **syntactic** function, which we define

⁶ Evans’ account (2003:139) of the same cognate marker in Biniŋ Gun-wok (Dalabon’s closest relative) conservatively adopts the “instrumental” label, but acknowledges an ergative usage (among others), as well as causal usages calqued from Dalabon. He also adopts the “instrumental” label as the primary usage of the suffix, in the latest piece on Dalabon as of the time of writing (Evans 2017b). Given their close relatedness, the conditions we postulate for the Dalabon marker are probably similar to those for the Biniŋ Gun-wok marker, including a third-singular patient animacy alternation in its bound pronominal morphology similar to that of Dalabon (§2.2.1).

in (19) with reference to Dixon’s universal semantic-syntactic primitives (1994) the ‘relations’ S, A and O; the ergative case-marker singles out the A-relation argument.

- (19) S = “intransitive subject” or monovalent (V₁) subject
A = “transitive subject” or multivalent (V₊) subject, which can be the Agent thematic role⁷
O = “transitive object”, multivalent (V₊) object, or Other argument

We posit that it also has a number of **discourse** functions and **pragmatic** functions. Discourse functions describe when the case-marked referent upsets an established flow of topic and focus (as explicated in §2.2.2). Pragmatic functions describe when the speaker chooses to employ *-yih* to emphasise some quality of the event being described (e.g. the participant involved, or the actuality of the action or situation), and to characterise them as somehow remarkable and/or contrary to the interlocutors’ expectations. Thus, we use “discourse” to refer to considerations relating to information structure specifically (i.e. discourse organisation), while “pragmatic” considerations encompass the interlocutors’ attitudes relative to the context of the utterance. In observing these two functions, we relate them to McGregor’s Expected Actor Principle (McGregor 1998: 516): the usage of *-yih* is motivated by some notions of unexpectedness – either in marking an unexpected shift in topichood, or marking some unexpected quality of a referent, with respect to the interlocutors’ assumptions of the world. In general, referents marked with *-yih* may have the properties of being non-topical, disruptive to the intentions of other characters, exercising unusual degrees of agentivity, hard to recover from contextual cues, or simply something that the speaker wants to draw attention to. Otherwise, when these criteria are not sufficiently met, they will eschew case-marking, or assume an even less overt manner of coding; given that less overt coding is more usual (see Appendix B), we conclude that the absence of the case marker is not consciously being used to *background* a referent⁸.

2.4 Data and methods

The data considered for this analysis consists of 35 recordings, totalling 414 minutes of Dalabon discourse. This is a subset of a larger corpus of about 60 transcribed hours (90 hours in total) collected by Maïa Ponsonnet (MP) mostly with four female speakers,⁹ all over the age of sixty, between 2007 to 2012.¹⁰ The data set for this study consists of a diverse range of mythological and biographic narratives, as well as stimuli-based elicitation sessions using still images but also video clips, and feature films – in particular the movie *Ten Canoes* (Heer & Djigirr 2006) (see Ponsonnet (2014b) on stimuli and

⁷ We define the following thematic roles: Agents as “wilful, controlling, [and] instigating participants in states of affairs”, and Patients as “strongly affected participants” (Van Valin 2005).

⁸ According to McGregor’s typology (2010; 2013), this would make Dalabon a Type 2 language: the presence of the marker has a coded function of making a referent more prominent, while its absence does not have the coded function of backgrounding it.

⁹ Maggie Ngarridjan Tukumba (MT), Lily Bennett (LB), Nikipini Daluk (ND) and Queenie Brennan (QB).

¹⁰ Data collection was funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies under the grants G2007/7242 and G2009/7439, and by the Hans Rausing Foundation’s Endangered Language Project under the grant IGS0125 (CI: Maïa Ponsonnet for all grants).

elicitation methods). Much of the data was videoed, and the combination of narratives and visual stimuli that the speaker could point to was particularly appropriate to analyse reference-tracking.

The data set contained an estimated 8,000 clauses (including around 5,000 multivalent clauses), with only 132 tokens of “ergative” *-yih*, out of which 125 tokens were glossed, translated, and analysed for their discourse and pragmatic context (seven were excluded due to problems with translation). In order to derive an overall incidence rate of *-yih*, as well as to investigate the role of verbal semantics, we chose a group of 18 semantically diverse verb roots (covering 46, or 35% of the 132 tokens of *-yih*; for a full list see Table 6 in Appendix B) and counted incidences of clauses based on the overtiness of nominal reference (see Table 2). Otherwise, our conclusions on the motivations for the distributions of *-yih* are based on qualitative analysis; quantitative discussions, such as frequency counts of case-markers based on a broader Dalabon corpus and structured around the results presented in this article, is a matter for future research.

3. The use of *-yih* in multivalent clauses

Multivalent clauses account for most occurrences of *-yih*, numbering 109 (including 1 serialised clause token; see §4.1) out of 132 tokens (82.6%). In such clauses, *-yih* always encodes the A argument, in line with its syntactic function, but there is no verb root for which “ergative” case-marking is obligatory. Table 3 summarises the frequency counts carried over a selection of 18 verb roots (grouped by their approximate meanings). It shows that *-yih* was only used in 6.58% of all clauses, and 30.67% of all clauses with an overt A nominal referent. Importantly, these numbers are comparable across all 18 verbs surveyed, indicating that with occurrences of *-yih* in multivalent clauses, verbal semantics, and in particular any notion of semantic transitivity (see Hopper & Thompson 1980; Næss 2007), does not have an identifiable influence over the distribution of the *-yih* in multivalent contexts (however, it may have some influence in monovalent contexts; see §4.3).

	‘get’	‘put’	‘give’	‘hit’	‘see’	Total
Clauses with A- <i>yih</i>	18	5	3	8	12	46
Clauses with overt A	57	16	12	22	43	150
Clauses with no A	128	56	44	87	188	503
Total	185	72	56	109	231	653
A- <i>yih</i> / overt A	31.58%	31.25%	25.00%	36.36%	27.91%	30.67%
A- <i>yih</i> / Total	9.73%	6.94%	5.36%	7.34%	5.19%	7.04%

Table 3: Summary of incidence rate of *-yih* in a sample of 18 verbs (grouped by approximate meanings). For a full list see Table 6 in Appendix B.

In this section, we will show that in these tokens, the distribution of *-yih* can always be described with reference to either its discourse or its pragmatic function. In §3.1, we show that *-yih* exerts a discourse function, marking an A argument that disrupts the flow of predicate focus. In §3.2, we explain its pragmatic function of marking A arguments that are unexpected with respect to their surrounding context. In §3.3, we show how the two functions can be subsumed under the notion of unexpectedness, which also motivates some split ergative marking systems.

3.1 Discourse function: *-yih* on non-topical As

A significant proportion of *-yih* targets non-topical A arguments (83 out of 108 multivalent tokens). Given the factors explained in §2.2.2, A arguments are most frequently topical – they are morphologically encoded on multivalent verb complexes, and are semantically agentive. When A arguments are not topical, the “ergative” case-marker may be used to clarify their discourse status (as well as their grammatical role if it is in question). Not all non-topical A arguments will be marked with *-yih* (not even here is the marker obligatory), but when they are, discourse organisation is a strong motivation. Two situations will be distinguished. More frequently, A arguments marked with *-yih* usurp

topichood to become the new topic for a short time: in these cases, it flags a shift in topic. In some other occasions, the “ergative” case-marked non-topical A only makes a brief appearance, but does not supplant the established topic. These cases are illustrated in turn below.

3.1.1 Shift in topichood

Topichood may alternate when there is no primary protagonist that can be established. In the data, cases of “ergative” case-marked non-topical As usurping primary topichood abound when two or more referents are equally prominent throughout the narrative, for example, in the stimulus “Jackal and Crow” (Carroll, Kelly & Gawne 2011) (see Appendix C), a picture task based on the classic narrative where a jackal successfully tricks a crow into surrendering his fish. Both characters are similar in animacy and agentivity, and their opposition is central to the unfolding of the narrative. When commenting on the Jackal and Crow stimulus, the speaker MT is asked to give a live interpretation of a story she has not seen before. With two equally prominent characters, topicality (as defined in §2.2) is difficult to establish and maintain for long stretches of discourse. Hence, the topic switches repeatedly between the two referents, with the aid of the “ergative” case-marker, as illustrated in example (20).

(20) 20110521b_003_MT 112-118 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]¹¹

112 *yang-djehneng* ***buka-h-ye-m-iyān*** *kahnunh*
 speech.content-as.if **3sg>3sg.h-R-COM-get/carry-FUT** D.ID

113 ***wakwak-kahyih*** *kanh djenj*
crow-ALL D.ID fish

114 *bah* ***buka-h-drahm-inj*** ***kanh wakwak-yih***
 CNJ **3sg>3sg.h-R-refuse-PP** **D.ID** **crow-ERG**

“**He (the jackal)** expected to take that fish from **the crow**, **but the crow** refused **him**.”

115 *mak* ***buka-ngabb-uyan***
 NEG **3sg>3sg.h-give-FUT**

116 ***ka-h-ngu-nj*** *kanihdja* ***ka-h-lng-wudjk-ang***
3sg>3sg-R-eat-PP there **3sg>3sg-R-SEQ-finish-PP**

117 *worrh-no* ***ka-h-djorrobk-ang*** 118 ***nga-h-lng-wudjk-ang***
 replete-FILL **3sg-R-jump?-PP** **3sg>3sg-R-SEQ-finish-PP**

“**He (the crow)** won’t give it (the fish) to **the jackal**, **he** ate it there and finished it. Replete, **he** ?jumped. ‘I have finished it,’ (**he** says/thinks).”

¹¹ Bold indicates reference to jackal or crow. Grey highlighting indicates clauses with topic switch.

The jackal is the established topic by line 112, and controls subject coreference with the clause over to line 113, while the crow (*wakwak*) is overtly expressed as the O argument (with the allative case-marker *-kahyih*). In line 114, the crow becomes the A argument of the next clause, and is framed as the foil to the jackal’s intention. For the rest of the example, the crow controls subject coreference, suggesting that it has become the new topic. Thus, the case-marker is used here as a switch reference device, focalising the non-topic, and establishing that as the new topic. To that extent, *-yih* may contribute to disambiguating the role of each participant (as per previous analyses of *-yih*, Evans 2003; Cutfield 2011). However, in the “Jackal and Crow” recording, the visual nature of the stimulus means that the speaker can and does often use gesturing to indicate reference, without having to rely on speech to switch topics and direct points of focus. Nevertheless, the case marker is still used to indicate quick changes of the topic.

The case-marker may also target referents that are specified out of a topical non-singular referent, in line with a disambiguating function. In example (21), from a picture description task, both participants are treated as topical in line 21, but one of them (in bold) is singled out in line 22: the interpretation seems to be that even though both referents are visibly laughing at each other, the case-marked referent’s doing so is unusual.

(21) 20110525a_004_MT 21 – 22 [Picture Series B]

21	<i>narra-h-rewo-rru-n</i>	22	<i>dja-h-rewo-n</i>	<i>yibung-yih</i>
	2du-R-laugh.at-RR-PR		3sg>2sg-R-laugh.at-PR	3sg-ERG

“You’re both laughing at each other, (but) **he**’s laughing at you.

3.1.2 *Non-topical As*

When the topic of a conversation is more biased towards one character, their claim to topichood is more strongly established, and as such, the “ergative” case-marker may simply signal a referent as contrastive with the discourse topic. This is illustrated in example (22), from a recording where the speaker tells the story of a husband who finds out that his wife had been seeing another man¹². Crucially, the two, Bangarn and Bangardi, are in a sibling relationship under the Dalabon subsection system (Evans, Merlan & Tukumba 2004:x) – this would have been heavily censured in Dalabon society, as MT demonstrates elsewhere in other narrations of the same story. The husband (*na-Ryan*; *na-* is the masculine class prefix) plays the main character of the narrative, while the actions of the other referents – his wife, her lover *Bangardi* and some policemen – are always framed in relation to him. This asymmetry of prominence is illustrated when these incidental characters are framed as actors that may compete with *na-Ryan* for topichood. Example (22) follows a question from the second author (who

¹² The names of the characters have been changed to preserve anonymity.

recorded the narrative) about whether or not Ryan would have speared his rival in olden times for stealing his wife.

(22) 20100722b_003_MT 426 – 440 [Husband & Wife 1/4]¹³

426 *mak mahkih **kanh na-Ryan** buka-yam-i **kanh Bangardi***
 NEG CNJ **D.ID MASC-PN 3sg>3sg.h-spear-IRR D.ID male.subsection.name**

427 *mak **buka-yam-i** kahke* 428 --
 NEG **3sg>3sg.h-spear-IRR** nothing

“**Ryan** didn’t spear **this Bangardi (his rival)**, **he** didn’t spear **him**.”

429 *kanh **buka-h-kirdikird-djirdm-e*** 430 ***Bangardi-yih***
D.ID 3sg>3sg.h-R-woman-steal-PP male.subsection.name-ERG

“**He** stole **his wife**, **the Bangardi**.”

431 *nunh mak **buka-yam-i** kahke* 432 --
 D.UNF NEG **3sg>3sg.h-spear-IRR** nothing

433 *mak mah— **barra-h-dja-b-urrun-i** kardu bah mak—*
 NEG CNJ **3du-R-just-hit-RR-IRR** maybe CNJ NEG

“**He** didn't spear **him**, no. But **he** didn't-- **they** just had a fight, but **he** didn't...”

434 *bah mak yang **buka-b-uy** kahke*
 CNJ NEG as.if **3sg>3sg.h-hit/kill-IRR** nothing

435 ***kanh Bangardi** **buka-h-marnu-djong-wurdiHm-inj***
D.ID male.subsection.name 3sg>3sg.h-R-BEN-fear-leave.abnormally-PP

“But apparently **he (Ryan)** didn’t bash **him**. **He** scared **Bangardi** off.”

436 *ani jad* 437 ***kanh kirdikird** ka-h— **buka-h-b-ong***
 only that **D.ID woman 3sg-R 3sg>3sg.h-hit/kill-PP**

438 *bulkkibulkkidj **buka-h-b-ong** **buka-h-munkuyu-nj** wodjbidol*
 really:REDUP **3sg>3sg.h-hit/kill-PP 3sg>3sg.h-send.away-PP** hospital

“Only the...**he** only bashed **the woman**, **he** bashed **her** badly, **he** sent **her** to hospital.”

¹³ Bold type indicates reference to *na-Ryan*, *Bangardi* or *kirdikird* (woman). Grey highlighting indicates clauses not coreferential with *na-Ryan* (the discourse topic).

439 -- 440 *yow kirdikird kanh ka-h— buka-h-b-ong*
 yeah **woman D.ID** 3sg-R **3sg>3sg.h**-hit/kill-PP

“Yeah, the woman **he, he** bashed **her**.”

Throughout the recording, *na-Ryan* is the established discourse topic, and thus controls co-reference on most of the verb complexes in the recording. He is never marked with the *-yih*, but often appears as an overtly expressed NP, such as in line 426. In lines 426 and 427, *Ryan* is topical, and *Bangardi* is more incidental (the clause also follows a question posed by the interviewer), and so they appear without case-marking in the same clause. In lines 429 and 430 (highlighted in grey) however, the action poses an interruption to the status quo established in the previous clauses; in the question of who spears whom (lines 426–427), *na-Ryan* is the presupposed Agent, but in the question of who steals the wife (line 429), *Bangardi* is the Agent, and conflicts with the established topic. *Bangardi* thus receives “ergative” case-marking to signal that the Agent (and subject of pronominal reference) has shifted away from the established topic to the unexpected referent *Bangardi*. Finally, being coded in a separate intonation pattern (right-displaced position) is additional evidence for nominal focus (see Cutfield 2011:70), posing a disruption to the predicate focus which characterise the rest of the excerpt outside of lines 429–430. In line 431, *Ryan* resumes control as the coreferential A argument, and referents introduced without marking and within the intonation pattern of the clause are treated as O arguments (*Bangardi* in 435, *kirdikird* in 437 and 440), or as non-core arguments (*wodjbidol* in 438). Apart from line 433 where the topic combines *Ryan* with *Bangardi* as a plural referent, *Ryan* remains topical throughout and is not overtly referred to, apart from in a few ambiguous demonstratives.

Hence, where the discourse biases a single referent to be topical, the use of *-yih* tends not to signal a permanent change in topic. Already here, we can see that pragmatic considerations can apply: lines 429–430 aren’t just breaking the presumed flow of discourse: they encode a highly unnatural act, committed by a highly disfavoured perpetrator. In the next section, we will show how pragmatic considerations can independently motivate case-marking, without necessarily breaking discourse flow.

3.2 Pragmatic correlates: unexpected Agents

Apart from disrupting the pattern of predicate focus, case-marked referents often have the following properties: they can be incidental to the events described, or be interfering in appearance or mentioning (both qualities demonstrated by *Bangardi* in example (22)), or be framed in opposition to the expected course of action (e.g. “You are looking at him, but he is looking back at you.”). These properties are pragmatic correlates of the discourse function. In other words: in relation to the interlocutors’ assumed knowledge with respect to the utterance, the shifts and contrasts in topic described in §3.1 often coincide with unexpected events. In line with this correlated function, speakers

may employ *-yih* to frame a referent as acting in a way contrary to the expectations of the speaker, and/or to the intentions and expectations of another character in the story (often the discourse topic, as evaluated by the speaker), independent of the referent’s informational status.

(23) 20100722b_003_MT 031 – 041 [Husband & Wife 1/4]¹⁴

034 *kanidjah ka-h-ngalk-ang* 035 *kanh-kun barra-h-b-urr-inj*
there **3sg>3sg-R-find-PP** D.ID-GEN **3du-R-hit/kill-RR-PP**

“**He (Ryan)** found it (the letter) there, this is why **they (Ryan and his wife)** had an argument.”

036 *mh* 037 *nadjamorrwu kanh nidjarra yila-yidjnja-n na brom Bulman*
policeman D.ID here 1pl>**3**-have-PR here from Bulman

038 039 *bula-h-lng-yu-nj* *djeil-kah* 040 *bula-h-durnkurn-dabk-ang*
3pl>3sg-R-SEQ-put-PP jail-LOC **3pl>3sg-R-jail-block-PP**

“**The policemen** we have here from Bulman, **they** put **him** in jail, **they** locked **him** up.”

041 *bula-h-marnu-murumurruk-wo-ng* *kanh nadjamorrwu-yih*
3pl>3sg-R-BEN-hard/strong:REDUP-VBLZR-PP **D.ID policeman-ERG**

“**They** got really tough with **him**, **these policemen**.”

This is shown in example (23), which takes place after *na-Ryan* discovers a love letter his wife had been hiding from him, and MT muses about what happened immediately afterwards. In lines 034–036, *na-Ryan* controls subject coreference together with his wife. When *nadjamorrwu* ‘policemen’ is introduced as the next topic in 037, it is within an impersonal construction, and when it is repeated for emphasis in line 041, it is suffixed with the “ergative” case-marker. The referent is incidental (the police are not described in further detail), highly interfering, and framed in opposition to the discourse topic *na-Ryan*. Hence, even though *nadjamorrwu* is an established local topic, it takes on case-marking to emphasise these qualities, as well as to bolster its claim to its own transient topichood.

It is actually quite uncommon that the case-marker’s discourse and pragmatic functions can be teased apart. In the “Jackal & Crow” stimulus, illustrated in examples (24) and (25), it so happens that the topics shift because of pragmatic concerns (lines highlighted in grey): in (24), a disruptive action is instigated by one of the characters, and in (25), an unfavourable result is imagined by the jackal (the apprehensive construction in line 155).

(24) 20110521b_003_MT 020 – 021 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]

¹⁴ Bold indicates reference to *na-Ryan* or *nadjamorrwu* ‘policemen’. Grey highlighting indicates clauses controlled by *nadjamorrwu* (as local topic).

020 *bah burra-h-marnu-djong-kalHm-inj*
 CNJ 3du>3sg-R-BEN-fear-climb-PP

021 *nunda rolu-yih bunu ka-h-kalehm-inj*
D.here dog-ERG 3du **3sg>3-R-fear-PP**

“They two (crows) climbed up in fear of him (the jackal). This jackal frightened them.”

(25) 20110521b_003_MT 153 – 155 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]

153 *yow korreh ka-h-ngu-yan ka-h-wudjk-iyen-kun* 154 *nganbarlok*
 yeah already 3sg>3sg-R-eat-FUT 3sg>3sg-R-SEQ-finish-PP quickly

155 *wakwak-yih mah wubuyi-yem-ang*
crow-ERG CNJ **3sg>3sg.APPR-steal-PR**

“Yeah, he (the jackal) will eat it (the fish) and finish it quickly, **in case the crow** steals it back.”

Another pragmatic correlate is that the case-marker occurs on A arguments that are not prototypical (unexpected) Agents: typically, inanimate referents. This coincidence is illustrated in example (26), concerning a car accident resulting in the death of a little girl. The speaker, MT, did not witness the accident herself, so her account is mediated by the narratives of her granddaughter *Rosita*, who was directly involved in the accident (but not present during the recording of the narrative).

(26) 20120707b_000_MT 071 – 081 [Car Accident]¹⁵

071 *ka-h-dengu-barbar---* 072 *ka-h-dengu-worworhm-inj* *kanh murdika*
3sg-R-foot-roll.over **3sg-R-foot-half.way?:REDUP-PP** **D.ID car**

073 *ka-h-lng-lambarr-budd-anginj*
3sg-R-SEQ-lying.on.back-be.many-PP

074 *kanh murdika nahda ka-h-ni-nj ka-h-lambarr-budd-anginj*
D.ID car there **3sg-R-sit-PP** **3sg-R-lying.on.back-be.many-PP**

“**It (the car)** rolled over. **The car** was wheels up, **it** was all laying on its back. **The car** lay there on its back.”

075 *kenbo mahkih* 076 *bula-h-n-ang* *kenh* 077 *Rosita ka-h-yawoh--*
 then CNJ 3pl>**3sg-R-see-PP** INTJ **PN** **3sg-R-again-**

078 *Rosita ka-dja-woh-keninjhi-m-inj* 079 *ka-h-burrama-n-inj*
PN **3sg-R-FOC-little.bit-whatsit-INCH-PP** **3sg-R-good/healthy-sit/be-PP**

¹⁵ Bold type indicates reference to *murdika* ‘car’, *Rosita* or ‘car tyre’. Grey highlighting indicates topic change.

“And then, they saw, well, **Rosita** was a bit...**she** was OK.”

080 *bah ka-h-milh-bakm-inj nidjarra*
CNJ 3sg-R-forehead-break-PP here

081 *buka-h-milh-duyhm-inj keninjhi-yih*
3sg>3sg.h-R-forehead-strike-PP **whatsit-ERG**

“But **she** had a bump there on the forehead...**it** knocked **her, the whatsit (car tyre)**.”

Up to line 075, *murdika* ‘car’ is topical, after which the topic smoothly transitions to *Rosita* (in grey). Given that the referent is an S argument (but see §4), encodes a non-incidental human character (she provides the main eyewitness account of the story), and is intonationally separated from the discourse, *Rosita* does not receive special emphatic marking. Conversely, in line 081, the car tyre (*keninjhi* ‘whatsit’) is marked with *-yih*, motivated by its high agentivity despite its low animacy, and its disruptive behaviour despite being otherwise incidental to the narrative, making it an unexpected actor. Its introduction as a new subject is also somewhat awkwardly placed: in the middle of talking about Rosita’s injury (where a language with a passive construction might have: “She had a bump there on the forehead...she was knocked in the forehead **by a car tyre**”). While the atypical animacy configuration is already grammatically indexed by the *buka-* suffix (discussed in §2.2.1), on the discourse level, there seems to be an especial need to frame this referent as unexpected with a case-marked nominal phrase – MT uses *daya-yih* ‘tyre-ERG’ later in the recording when describing how the car tyre hit other people as well. Given the subcategorisation patterns of most of its verbs, and its syntactic rules for promoting higher-animate arguments (Ponsonnet n.d.), Dalabon discourse is generally biased towards human referents. Thus, there are not many cases of inanimate referents being overtly expressed, let alone wresting topichood from animate participants. When inanimate referents do act like animate referents then (i.e. being an A argument), they may attract pragmatic marking to index their unusualness. This example validates previous observations of *-yih* being motivated by animacy principles (Cutfield 2011; Evans 2003), but this should better be understood as a side-effect of a broader motivating principle.

For one, there is no evidence for a systematic animacy hierarchy at play (apart from in the pronominal morphology discussed in §2.2.1). In example (27) we see that inanimate referents acting on animate referents do not always require “ergative” case-marking¹⁶ (though on the grammatical level, the pronominal prefix *buka-* must always reflect this configuration). Further, in the context of a doctor’s visitation, *kolbban* ‘phlegm’, while inanimate, is not particularly unexpected, and the event of it clearing

¹⁶ Inanimate As not marked with *-yih* are uncommon, but given that overt inanimate A arguments are also uncommon, the statistics are not significant.

up is not disruptive to the narrative. Given these considerations, there is no especial need to emphasise its agentivity or identity with case-marking.

(27) 20110601_003_MT 46 [Personal narrative]

46 *kolbban buka-h-bawo-ng*

phlegm 3sg>3sg.h-R-leave-PP

“His **phlegm** cleared up (lit. **the phlegm** left him).”

3.3 Unexpectedness

Whether speakers use the marker to flag an A argument that interferes with the expected topic, to characterise participants that act in an unexpected way in the event under description, or to emphasise the unusual configuration of lower-animate participants with high agentivity (or all of these together), the use of *-yih* in multivalent clauses always signals some unexpected quality. This overarching principle is in line with the observations in McGregor’s Expected Actor Principle (1998:516): “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.”

Beyond the reconciliation of the discourse and pragmatic functions of the Dalabon “ergative” marker, unexpectedness also bridges with principles governing split ergativity, in languages where ergative case assignment is grammatically selectional (Dixon 1994). Split ergative languages may assign the ergative case based on hierarchies measuring semantic notions such as animacy, agentivity, deixis, empathy, or some other property of the nominal referent (Silverstein 1976; Wierzbicka 1981; DeLancey 1981; Fauconnier 2011). Typically, these hierarchies illustrate that constructions involving speech act participants (first- and second-persons) are more likely to eschew the ergative construction than human third-persons, which in turn outrank non-human animates and inanimates. In Dyrbal (Pama-Nyungan, Far North Queensland) for instance, nominative–accusative case-marking generally appears on first- and second-person referents, while ergative–absolutive case-marking generally appears on all third-person referents, animate and inanimate (Dixon 1972:161).

One of the principles behind the development of these split systems may be that relations between participants that are unusual or less expected (i.e. marked) are singled out to differentiate them from more usual and expected (i.e. unmarked) relations. This is what we have seen in Dalabon thus far: *-yih* marks referents which flout the expectations of the interlocutors established in prior discourse, whether they be unexpected because of their low animacy, or relationship to the other (more topical) referents, as in example (20). In this way, unexpectedness (in our discourse and pragmatic sense) can be reconciled with semantically-based split systems. Indeed, as we see in example (26), animacy can play a role (if indirectly) in assigning *-yih*. Although a distinction should still be maintained between splits

based on semantic principles, and those based on discourse and pragmatic principles, subsuming both analyses under a notion of unexpectedness, as suggested by McGregor (2006), highlights shared dimensions between these types of ergativity.

3.4 Summary on multivalent clauses

We have shown how the “ergative” case-marker *-yih* can be described with two co-dependent analyses of unexpectedness: a discourse analysis motivated by non-topicality, and an analysis motivated by pragmatic markedness. In doing so, we have shown that the syntactic function of the case-marker (“mark the A”) only serves as a restriction (but see §4), rather than a prescription, of its distribution, as is the case in “regular” ergative languages. Importantly, these discourse and pragmatic principles differ from grammatical principles in that they motivate the distribution of *-yih* but do not dictate it.

3. The use of *-yih* in monovalent clauses

The Dalabon marker *-yih* does not occur solely on the A argument of multivalent clauses: in certain contexts, it extends to S arguments of monovalent clauses (i.e. absolutive arguments). The appearance of *-yih* on an S argument referent is more confined than that on A arguments, but is not negligible: 24 tokens (18.2% of all “ergative” *-yih* in our corpus – but only a very small proportion of the thousands of monovalent clauses in the corpus) across 9 lexically intransitive verbs in the data set, as summarised in *Table 4*.

No. of tokens (total: 24)	Verb Roots	Usage
15	<i>yin</i>	to say, to think, to do
4	<i>merey-di</i>	to be jealous
1	<i>kangu-weh-mu</i>	to feel bad
1	{ <i>worhdi</i> <i>kodj-dadjmu</i>	to stand to sulk
1	{ <i>run</i> <i>dje-yerrkmu</i>	to cry ?to release tears
1	{ <i>bon</i> <i>mang</i>	to go to get (v.t.)
1	<i>yolh-ni</i>	to be in love

Table 4: All tokens of -yih on a VI. Braces represent serialisation (see §4.1); one “ergative” case-marked referent is coreferential over adjacent verb complexes.

These monovalent occurrences of *-yih* are found in three types of environment:

- in serialised clauses¹⁷ consisting of both monovalent and multivalent clauses, in what Haviland (1979:154) termed “ergative hopping”, discussed in §4.1;
- most frequently, when marking the speaker referent on a clause headed by the verb root *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’;
- on a clause headed by certain emotion verbs, such as *merey-di* ‘to be jealous’ and *kodj-dadj(mu)* ‘to sulk, to be sad’ (Ponsonnet 2014a:157, 173)¹⁸

Ergative marking of absolutive arguments has also been observed in, among other languages, Kuuk Thayorre (Gaby 2010), Gurindji Kriol (Meakins & O’Shannessy 2010), Bunuba (Rumsey 2010),

¹⁷ We use “serialised” and “serialisation” as theory-neutral terms, to refer to both “serial verbs” or “serial clauses”.

¹⁸ The fact that the data set is extracted from a corpus collected in the view to document the expression of emotions in Dalabon is likely to have favored such occurrences. Nevertheless, given the extent of the corpus (60 transcribed hours, see §1.3), and the extent of topics covered, the bias towards emotions could not possibly have excluded the occurrence of *-yih* on other verbs as well.

Jingulu (Pensalfini 1999), and, outside of Australia, Ku Waru (PNG, Trans New Guinea, Rumsey 2010), and Kurtöp (Bhutan, Tibeto-Burman, Hyslop 2010). Elaborating upon these authors' insight around what we have called pragmatic functions, we undertake a broader analysis informed by the discourse context, as we have done for multivalent clauses.

4.1 Serialised clauses and “ergative hopping”

“Ergative hopping” (Haviland 1979:154) occurs when, in serialised constructions, *-yih* marks a participant which is both the S argument of a monovalent clause and the A argument of a bivalent clause. The same phenomenon is reported by Rumsey (2010) for Bunuba (Australia, Bunuban), McGregor (1992) for Gooniyandi (Australia, Bunuban), and Haviland (1979) for Guugu Yimidhirr (Australia, Pama-Nyungan, Yalanjic). Serialisation is difficult to rigorously classify (see Evans' definition for Bininj Gun-wok, 2003:659), and the head-marking nature of Dalabon and Bininj Gun-wok make it difficult to describe how each clause is individuated, and how each of them function in the wider serial context. Given that serialised clauses typically project one argument structure (Aikhenvald 2006:13), such serialised constructions are likely just multivalent clauses “in disguise”; “ergative hopping” does not greatly complicate our understanding of ergative case-marking in these languages, but it does suggest that serialised clauses form a separate category of their own, and are not just the sum of their parts.

Example (28) shows one of the few unambiguous instances that we found of a serialised clause containing both a transitive and an intransitive verb root, with an “ergative” case-marked referent clearly governing coreference over a single intonational unit (corresponding to Evans' definition, but relaxing his restriction on intervening material).

- (28) 20120710a_002_MT 48 – 49 [Ten Canoes 1/6]
- 48 *bah kanunh wawurd-no-yih ka-h-bo-ng*
 CONJ D.ID young.one-FILL-ERG 3sg-R-go-PP
- 49 *dulh ka-h-m-e*
 tree 3sg>3sg-R-get-PP

“And **this young man, he** went and got the tree (bark).”

This comes from the speaker's live description of an event within the film *Ten Canoes*: an older brother is showing his younger brother how to strip off tree bark to make the canoe. In line 48, there is a monovalent clause headed by *bon* ‘to go’ followed by a bivalent clause headed by *mang* ‘to get’ in line 49. Both clauses are controlled by the “ergative” case-marked referent *kanunh wawurd-no-yih* ‘this young man’ (the younger brother) in line 48. Appealing to the discourse context, both brothers alternate in topicality, but since the younger brother is the more inexperienced one (younger people learning the

ways of the older generation forms the subtext of the film), the act of him getting the tree bark instead of his brother registers as less typical (and hence more unexpected), thus motivating its case-marking.

4.2 Functions of *-yih* on monovalent clauses

As presented in *Table 4* above, by far the most common monovalent environment for *-yih* is on clauses headed by the verb root *yin*, ‘to say, to think, to do’. Because of this higher frequency, occurrences of *-yih* with *yin* will be the point of departure of our analysis. In §4.3, we compare this analysis with tokens of *-yih* in (derived) multivalent *yin* clauses (which largely conform to the considerations explored for other multivalent clauses). Finally in §4.4, we extend it to other monovalent verbs, namely with emotion verbs.

The verb root *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’ is formally monovalent, in the sense that it consistently receives prefixes from the monovalent set. The verb can attract a range of English translations, with the dictionary recording a number of related senses: ‘to do’, ‘to say’, ‘to think’, ‘to call or designate something’, and other senses when phrasally collocated with other roots (cf. Schultze-Berndt 2008 for generalised action verbs in other languages). As such, *yin* has a very high frequency count, with 529 tokens found in 35 recordings totalling 4 hours (an average of 15 tokens per recording or 1.28 tokens per minute), making it perhaps one of the most common verb roots in the language. In our data set, collected with a view to elicit intentions and emotions (Ponsonnet 2014a), *yin* most often means ‘say’ or ‘think’ (but glossed as ‘say/do’). Examples (29), (30) and (31) demonstrate how *yin* can be used in monovalent contexts and where it appears (usually at the end of the sentence, after the content complement).

(29) 20110529_003_MT 037 – 039 [Personal narrative]

037 *nahda mah ka-ye-bo-niyan bo* 038 *narra-h-djarrk-bo-niyan*
 there CNJ 3sg-SUB-go-FUT or? 2du-R-together-go-FUT

039 *duway-no nga-h-yi-ninj*
 husband-3sg.POSS 1sg-R-say/do-PP

“‘If he goes away anywhere, you two will stay together, (you and) your husband,’ **I said.**”

(30) 20120710b_003_MT 187 [Ten Canoes 2/6]

187 *nunda ka-h-bo-ng kardu ngorr wuku-danj-b-un bala-h-yi-n*
 D.here 3sg-R-go-PR maybe 12pl 3sg>12.APPR-spear-hit/kill-PR 3pl-R-say/do-PR

“‘He might go up to these two, maybe to spear them,’ **they think.**”

(31) 20110518a_002_QB 596 – 597 [Whistle Duck Story]

596 *manjh-keninjh-kun* 597 *kanunh nga-h-Ing-yi-ninj ka-h-yi-n*
 what.for-GEN D.ID 1sg-R-SEQ-say/do-PP 3sg-R-say/do-PR

“‘Why is it that **I did** this?’ he thinks.”

Of the 334 tokens of *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’ in the corpus, 56 (16.77%) appear with the speaker overtly referenced, and 15 (4.49%) appear with “ergative” case-marking on the speaker referent. This is slightly lower than the 7.04% recorded for our sample of multivalent verbs (see §3 and Appendix B), but is a significant proportion, considering it covers more than a quarter of all speaker referents (15/56 = 26.79%). In contrast to *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’, the emotion verb roots, while collectively many in number, have a far lower individual frequency, so we do not offer a similar frequency count. Generally speaking, we observe that monovalent *yin* clauses make up the bulk of “ergative” case-marking on monovalent clauses (which comprise almost 20% of all cases of *-yih* in our corpus), with emotion verb clauses as not-insignificant outliers, while other intransitive verb roots do not interact with *-yih* in monovalent contexts at all. Hence, we base our analysis on *yin* before extrapolating it to other monovalent clauses (the emotion verbs). In the following sections, we show that the distribution of the marker with the verb *yin* ‘to say, to think’ is motivated by two functions (using labels pre-defined in §2.3):

- A discourse (henceforth: *disambiguation*) function, whereby the marker clarifies the identity of the speaker whose speech is being reported after a long period of deferred topichood (§4.2.1). Out of 15 “ergative” *yin* tokens, 8 demonstrate this function.
- A pragmatic (henceforth: *emphasis*) function, where the marker serves to flag either the assertive power of the speech content being reported, or the stance of the referent delivering it (§4.2.2). Out of 15 “ergative” *yin* tokens, 13 demonstrate this function.

As with those functions discussed for multivalent clauses, these parallel motivations will often apply simultaneously. As they are realised somewhat differently compared to the multivalent occurrences, at least within the discourse context, we have used more descriptive labels to capture the role served by the case-marker in monovalent contexts. We leave the speculation on paths of extension between multivalent and monovalent clauses for §4.3.

4.2.1 *Disambiguation function*

Example (32) comes from another excerpt of MT describing the film *Ten Canoes*, and demonstrates a disambiguation function of *-yih*. In the movie, some Aboriginal tribesmen receive the impromptu visit of a stranger who has intruded on their land. The excerpt follows from a series of

statements about what the tribesmen think that the stranger is going to do with their *nguh-no* ‘shit’, which, they believe, will allow a sorcerer to put a spell on their spirit or kill them (*wunjman*¹⁹). The tribe’s own *kurdang* ‘sorcerer’ confirms their fears by detailing at length what would happen.

(32) 20120710b_003_MT 247 – 269 [Ten Canoes 2/6]²⁰

- 247 *bah nala-h-naHn-arru-niyan* ***ka-h-yi-ninj*** 248 *yo*
 CNJ 2pl-R-see.REDUP-RR-FUT **3sg-R-say/do-PP** yeah
 “‘So you mob be careful,’ **he** says. Yeah.”
- 249 *djung ka-h-lng-ki-ninj mimal-kah*
 over.there 3sg-R-SEQ-cook-PI fire-LOC
- 250 *bulu ka-h-wunj-m-e*
 3pl 3sg>3-R-cast.spell.with.belongings-PP
 “‘He cooked it in the fire over there. He (the stranger) put a spell on their belongings.’”
- 251 252 *kanh ngorr ka-h---* 253 *ka-h-wunj-wurthk-an* *kahnunh*
 D.ID 12pl 3sg>12-R 3sg>12-R-belongings-light.fire-PR D.ID
- 254 *ka-h-ki-ninj*
 3sg-R-cook-PI
 “‘He is burning our belongings, burning them.’”
- 255 *nunh kenbo* 256 *ngarra-h-lng-won-arru-niyan nahda wurr-ngokorrng*
 D.UNF then 12pl-R-SEQ-listen-RR-FUT like.that stomach-12pl.POSS
 “‘Then for that reason, we will feel bad in our stomachs.’”
- 257 *ngorr ka-h-wunj-m-ang*
 12pl 3sg>12-R-cast.spell.with.belongings-PR
- 258 *bah wurr-nokorrng ngarra-h-won-arru-niyan*
 CNJ stomach-2du.POSS 12pl-R-listen-RR-FUT
- 259 *ngarra-h-lng-berderdem-iyen kenbo* 260 ***ka-h-yi-ninj***
 12pl-R-SEQ-be.in.pain-FUT then **3sg-R-say/do-PP**

¹⁹ The lexicalised compound *wunj+mang*, literally ‘belongings+get’, has the meaning of ‘to put a spell on someone using their belongings’, referring to the performance of black magic on one’s clothes and other personal effects.

²⁰ Grey highlighting indicates reported speech head clause, grey text indicates reported speech complement clause, bold text indicates *kurdang* ‘sorcerer’ as topic.

“‘He put a spell on us with our belongings, and we will feel bad in our stomachs, then we will be in pain,’ **he says.**”

261 *mm kenbo ngarra-h-do-n* ***ka-h-yi-ninj***
mm then 12pl-R-die-PR **3sg-R-say/do-PP**

262 *bah bala-h-lng-djong-m-arru-n*
CNJ 3pl-R-SEQ-fear-INCH-RR-PR

“‘Then you mob will die,’ **he says.** And then they (the tribesmen) became frightened.”

263 *keninjh-kun nula-h-yinmiwo-n* ***ka-h-yi-n***
whatsit-GEN 2pl>3sg-R-tell-PR **3sg-R-say/do-PR**

“‘Because you mob talked to the whosit,’ **he says.**”

264 *kardu wudji-do-n dohkardu wudji--- woh*
maybe 2sg.APPR-die-PR or.maybe 2sg.APPR INTJ

265 *dja-h-waral-ye-komhm-iyah* 266 *kanh*
3sg>2sg-R-spirit-COM-leave.abnormally-FUT D.ID

“‘You might die, or maybe, he will steal your spirit, that (stranger).”

267 *dja-h-lng-waral-ye-komhm-iyah*
3sg>2sg-R-SEQ-spirit-COM-leave.abnormally-FUT
kanh nguh-no-ngu-yih
D.ID shit-FILL-2sg.POSS-INSTR

268 *dja-h-lng-do-niyah* 269 ***ka-h-yi-ninj*** ***kanh kurdang-yih***
2sg-R-SEQ-die-FUT **3sg-R-say/do-PP D.ID sorcerer-ERG**

“‘He will steal your spirit, using your shit, then you’ll die,’ **the sorcerer said.**”

(5.7s of silence follows, watching the film)

The matrix topic throughout the excerpt is the *kurdang* ‘sorcerer’ delivering the explanation, evident from the subject coreference of the pronominal prefixes in lines 247, 260, 261, 263 and 269 (in bold). As he appears on the screen while MT is speaking, he is not overtly introduced, and his identity is not explicitly affirmed until the very end of this excerpt – after which the discourse continues with a different topic. Multiple referents are active in the discourse: the nervous tribesmen (whose prominence is generally downplayed throughout the ‘Ten Canoes’ recordings), the suspicious stranger on the forefront of their minds, and the sorcerer giving his interpretation. While the matrix topic is the sorcerer, the stranger is locally topical in much of the speech content complement clauses: in lines 249–254

burning the belongings, and lines 265–267, stealing the tribesmen’s spirits. Although reference to the tribesmen can easily be recovered from the plural pronominal prefix (as well as the second-person prefix when a specific individual is addressed), disambiguating the sorcerer and the stranger is harder, and must rely on context: which one is talking to the men, and which one is casting the spell on them. Thus, a need to clarify the identity of the referent motivates the overt expression of *kurdang* in line 269, where its matrix-topic status is clarified by the use of *-yih*.

Although clarification of the speaker referent can be achieved without the marker, *-yih* is regularly employed by Dalabon speakers to do so explicitly. *Table 5* shows that out of the 15 instances of *-yih* occurring on the speaker referent of a monovalent *yin* clause, 11 tokens (~73%) occur after the verb, sometimes prosodically detached from the rest of the clause. For the tokens with a speaker referent without *-yih*, there is less bias towards this position. Cutfield (2011:58–65) describes these post-verbal referents (with or without the case-marker) as *antitopics* (see also Lambrecht 1994:204), and when prosodically detached, as ‘afterthought’ units with a reaffirming function. Given that referents marked with *-yih* on monovalent *yin* clauses are predominantly found post-verbally, then Cutfield’s analysis would accord with our analysis of *-yih* being used as a tool for disambiguation.

Mode	Speaker before V		Speaker after V		TOTAL
Sp. only	17	43%	23	57%	40
Sp. with <i>-yih</i>	4	27%	11	73%	15
Total	21	38%	34	62%	55

Table 5: Position of speaker referent (Sp.) in relation to a monovalent yin clause ('to say, to think, to do').

This disambiguation function seems to run contrary to the conditions proposed for multivalent clauses, where *-yih* was shown to be attracted by a referent’s non-topicality. In multivalent clauses, *-yih* helps to contrast the A argument against an established topic, but for monovalent *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’ clauses, it simply reaffirms the topical referent (the speaker). By closer inspection, these do not necessarily contradict each other. As we showed for example (15) in §2.2.2, discourse structure may be tiered when reported speech complements are introduced by a *yin* clause. In this structure, reported speech complements are complicated by the fact that the frame of pronominal reference is not fixed, for example, when speakers assume the point of view of the characters they are speaking about, who may in turn assume the point of view of another person in a ‘he said that she said...’ manner – all without any overt embedding device²¹. In long stretches of reported speech, the matrix speaker referent will remain topical, without necessarily remaining active (i.e. overtly expressed), so when the referent needs to be unambiguously reaffirmed, the “ergative” case-marker is employed to do so. Hence, this type of

²¹ For subordination strategies in Dalabon, see Evans (2006).

switch reference, from a local topic within the reported speech complement(s) to the speaker matrix topic, is not too dissimilar from the switch reference explored for other unexpected referents. The fact that *-yih* has developed this particular disambiguation function with the verb *yin* ‘to say, to think’ likely results from the functional specialisation of this verb, as a framing device for reported speech/thought, which creates a need for the speaker to be disambiguated when the discourse structure of the speech complement overtakes that of the matrix structure for an extended period of time.

Nevertheless, this disambiguating function is also attested with monovalent emotion verb roots (6 out of 8 tokens), as illustrated with the roots *dje-yerrkmu* ‘?shed tears’ and *run* ‘cry’ in example (33). This example comes from a stimulus recording, with the speaker describing a video recording designed to elicit emotional descriptions (see Appendix C). Like with *yin* ‘to say, to think’ in example (32), situations described by emotion verbs may involve several animate participants, and so are prone to role ambiguity, which *-yih* may be used to resolve.

(33) 20120705b_001_MT 120 – 122 [Mind Reading Emotion Library]

120 *nunda ka-h-ko-ye-bawo-ng ka-h-ye-ni*
D.here 3sg-R-flower-COM-leave-PP 3sg-R-COM-sit/be:PR

121 *yibung-karn-- wali ka-h-dje-yerrkm-inj ka-h-ru-yan*
3sg-EMPH in.turn 3sg-R-nose-release-PP 3sg-R-cry-FUT

122 *duway-no-yih*
husband-3sg.POSS-ERG

“This one (the woman) rejected his flowers. So this one in turn [gestures to man on screen], he **is ?shedding tears, he’s crying**, her husband.”

4.2.2 *Emphasis function*

In the examples that we have discussed for monovalent clauses so far, *-yih* almost always imparts an emphatic quality to the referent: after all, a referent must be emphasised if it is to be disambiguated. Here, we look at examples where referents are emphasised, even when their identity and role are not in question. This is illustrated in example (34), another comment on *Ten Canoes*. The narrative of the film involves a younger brother harbouring an improper desire for his older brother’s youngest wife, and the example below follows from a series of statements about the younger brother wanting a wife for himself. Unlike example (32) in §4.2.1, the narrative has transitioned to the younger brother’s motivations so there is no competition for topichood, and it is clear who the author of the reported speech is throughout.

(34) 20120710b_003_MT 34 – 41 [Ten Canoes 2/6]²²

034 *djila-h-ngabb-uyan* 035 *djila-h-berbb-uyan*
3pl>2sg-R-give-FUT 3pl>2sg-R-spouse.promise-FUT

“**You** will be given (a wife), **you** will be promised one.”

036 *bah yibung ka-h-yi-ninj*
CNJ 3sg 3sg-R-say/do-PP

037 *mhmh mak ke munguyh djadmud nga-d-angiyān*
INTJ NEG INTJ always single.boy 1sg-stand-FUT

“But **he** (**the young one**) thinks, ‘Nuh-uh, **I** can’t remain single **all that time**.’”

038 *kirdikird ke ngey mah nga-h-Ing-djare*
woman INTJ 1sg CNJ 1sg-R-SEQ-desire

ka-h-yi-ninj yawor-no-yih
3sg-R-say/do-PP little.one-FILL-ERG

039 *ngey kardu kirdikird-dih munguyh nga-h-dja-bo-niyan*
1sg maybe woman-PRIV always 1sg-R-FOC-go-FUT

“‘A wife, **well** that’s what **I** want!’ **he** thinks, **the young one**. ‘Me, **I** might stay without a wife **all this time**.’”

040 *mak kardu bula-berbb-uyan*
NEG maybe 3pl>1sg-spouse.promise-FUT

041 *mak kardu bula-dabung-nam-i*
NEG maybe 3pl>1sg-promised.wife-betrothe-IRR

“‘Maybe they **won’t** promise **me** one, maybe they **won’t** promise **me** a wife’ (he thinks).”

The “ergative” case-marker is but one of many emphatic devices used throughout this excerpt, such as the repeated negations, the intensifying interjection *ke*, *munguyh* ‘always, all that time’, and the overt expression of the free pronouns *yibung* ‘him’ (in 36) and *ngey* ‘me’ (in 38 and 39), both referring to the younger brother. Rather than reaffirming the identity of the referent, the “ergative” case-marker contributes to emphasising his stance: he is frustrated about the custom of marriage, and this puts him in opposition with what is expected of younger brothers – to be loyal and subservient to the customs

²² Bold type indicates reference to young man. Grey highlighting indicates emphatic device (overt nominal phrase, negator, intensifying interjection, or adverbial).

laid down by their elders (his older brother). Hence, *-yih* contributes to highlighting the antagonistic nature of this stance, by emphasising the importance of the speech content.

This emphasis function is also attested with emotion verb roots (found in all 8 tokens). In example (35), disambiguation does not apply, since the dual person prefix clearly identifies *kanh burrkunh-ko Kamanj* ‘these two Kamanj (girls)’ as the S argument. Instead, the speaker is explaining how two daughters opposed the decision of their own parents in a community conflict and stood against them publicly. The speaker’s use of *-yih* flags that they regard this attitude as remarkable on their part.

(35) 20120708b_006_MT 165 – 167 [Narrative about community conflict]

165 *barra-h-Ing-kangu-weh-m-inj*

3du-R-SEQ-belly-bad-INCH-PP

166 *kanh burrkunh-ko Kamanj*

D.ID two-DY female.subsection.name

167 *Lisabeth wurd-no-yih*

PN child-3sg.POSS-ERG

“Then they **got angry**, those two Kamanj, Lisabeth’s children.”

Both examples (34) and (35) are comparable to those examples in multivalent clauses where antagonistic (and therefore unexpected) actions of the participants are singled out. However, in these monovalent clauses, unexpectedness does not concern the *identity* of the referent, but the *content* of their thoughts and actions.

4.3 Semantic transitivity?

In our survey of multivalent verb roots (§3, Table 3), we found that the notion of semantic transitivity (Hopper & Thompson 1980) did not affect the distribution of the “ergative” case-marker. However, the distribution of *-yih* on monovalent clauses shows that some notion of semantic transitivity may well apply, as the verb roots that attract *yih*, whilst formally monovalent, can be interpreted as semantically transitive. For one, clauses with *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’ usually take on semantically transitive interpretations, when the encoded event entails more participants than is formally specified: the speaker (or thinker or doer), the complement and, in the sense of ‘to speak’ and sometimes ‘to do’, the addressee. This can be seen in example (36), from the Whistle Duck story, a traditional tale recounted by Queenie Brennan (QB), where the orange bat’s (*warlang*) mother is trying to dissuade her son from killing the rainbow serpent for stealing his girlfriend.

(36) 20110518a_002_QB 442 – 444 [Whistle Duck Story]

442 *kahke kuyin wurd-ngan* 443 *ka-h-yi-ninj kanh*
 NEG indeed? son-1sg.POSS 3sg-R-say/do-PP D.ID

444 *nah-no*
 mother-3sg.POSS

“Don’t (kill him) indeed, my son! his mother said (to her son).”

For speech acts that entail the presence of an addressee, *yin* may head a formally bivalent clause, through the following morphological processes: inflected with the benefactive applicative prefix *marnu-*, or with the thematic²³ *-won* in the lexical form *yinmiwon* ‘to tell (someone)’ (*-mi* is a non-productive nominaliser). Tokens of such multivalent clauses with *yin* are quite common (195 out of 529 of all *yin* clauses in our data, or 36.9%), and the ratio of *-yih* marking these speaker referents is comparable with that on other multivalent clauses (see Table 7 in Appendix B). Examples (37) and (38) show such constructions with “ergative” case-marked speaker referents: in (37) (involving the same Jackal and Crow stimulus as in §3.1), *-yih* is used to reaffirm the topic after being introduced by the interlocuter, while in (38) (from one of the Ten Canoes stimulus recordings), *-yih* seems to be used to disambiguate the speaker referent (both brothers are on screen at this point), though it may also be motivated by the pragmatic weight of the reported speech complement (the eldest giving counsel to his younger brother).

(37) 20110521b_003_MT 146 [Jackal & Crow (MT)]

146 *da-h-lng-ngu-n buka-h-marnu-yi-n wawkak-yih*
 2sg>3sg-SEQ-eat-PR 3sg>3sg.h-R-BEN-say/do-PR **crow-ERG**

“‘So you eat it,’ **the crow** says to him (the jackal).”

(38) 20120710a_002_MT 55 – 56 [Ten Canoes 1/6]

55 *buka-h-yinmiwo-ng kanh wurrungu-no-yih*
 3sg>3sg.h-R-tell-PP **D.ID eldest.one-FILL-ERG**

56 *mak kirdikird-kun dja-h-yolh-weh-m-iniyan*
 NEG woman-PURP 2sg-R-feelings-bad-INCH-FUT

“**The eldest one** [gestures to man on screen] told him (the younger brother), ‘Don’t start feeling bad about women.’”

Although example (36) and (32) (in §4.2.1) are formally monovalent, the entailed additional arguments suggest that there is an equivalence with the formally multivalent clauses in (37) and (38). To that extent, the formal valency of the clause may not match the semantics; formally monovalent *yin* clauses can be semantically transitive. Rumsey (2010) reports on comparable uses of ergative markers

²³ In Gunwinyguan languages, the ‘thematic’ traditionally refers to the monosyllabic verb root that carries the inflection (Evans & Merlan 2003; Saulwick 2003:110–158).

with reported-speech verbs in Bunuba (Bunuban, Kimberley region) and Ku Waru (Trans New Guinea, Southern Highlands), and explains this phenomenon with reference to these verbs' higher degree of semantic transitivity (Hopper & Thompson 1980; Næss 2007). Treating the speech complement as a grammatical object, Rumsey justifies the presence of the ergative case-marker based on two of Hopper and Thompson's transitivity features, the *affectedness* and *individuation* of the O argument, rather than on any property of the speaker argument (such as agentivity). In his words, "the relevant 'object property' [is] a matter of the extent to which the reported utterance [is] being focussed on *as distinct from* the utterance in which it [is] being framed" (2010:1674, his italics).

While *yin* 'to say, to think, to do' is clearly semantically transitive regardless of its formal valency, we do not follow Rumsey's suggestion that these transitivity factors motivate the use of *-yih* with the Dalabon verb.²⁴ We believe it is more direct and descriptive to attribute "ergative" case-marking to how the speaker referent is being framed in the discourse and pragmatic context (such as reaffirming identity, or emphasising agentivity or stance), rather than to an intrinsic semantic property of the speech complement²⁵. Hence, to explain how *-yih* came to mark S arguments of monovalent clauses (but with more arguments than formally entailed), we consider that those functions of *-yih* in multivalent clauses are being "recycled" for the purposes of emphasis and disambiguation.

4.4 The use of *-yih* on emotion predicates

Although we have demonstrated that semantic transitivity has very little to do with the use of *-yih*, it is plausible that it has influenced the extension of *-yih* to mark the S argument of emotion verbs. As listed in *Table 4* in the introduction to §4, there are 6 instances of *-yih* on the referent of a clause headed by a formally monovalent emotion verb: 4 on *merey-di* 'to be jealous', and one each on *kangu-weh-mun* 'to feel bad', *dje-yerrkmu* 'to cry', and *kodj-dadjmu* 'to sulk, to be upset' (*dje-yerrkmu* and *kodj-dadjmu* appear within serialised constructions with other monovalent verbs). These sporadic occurrences of *-yih* on emotion verbs all match the functions we have posited so far for both multivalent and monovalent clauses.

In example (33) in §4.2.1, repeated here for convenience, we saw the disambiguation function of *-yih* on a clause headed by *dje-yerrkmu* 'cry' and its emphasis function on a clause headed by *kangu-weh-mun* 'feel bad' in example (35) in §4.2.2.

²⁴ Semantic motivations similar to what Rumsey describes have been described in other languages with ergative marking in formally monovalent clauses, such as in many Tibeto-Burman languages (Hyslop 2010; Willis 2011), Gurindji Kriol (Meakins 2015), and Kuuk Thaayorre (Gaby 2010). Although they provide fine pragmatic analyses, none provide a robust discourse analysis.

²⁵ Speech complements (in Dalabon, as well as around Australia more generally) are difficult to analyse as embodying an O-relation, as they often take the form of finite clauses (with no subordinate marking), attached paratactically to the clause encoding the speech event.

(33) 20120705b_001_MT 120 – 122 [Mind Reading Emotion Library]

120 *nunda ka-h-ko-ye-bawo-ng ka-h-ye-ni*
D.here 3sg-R-flower-COM-leave-PP 3sg-R-COM-sit/be:PR

121 *yibung-karn-- wali ka-h-dje-yerrkm-inj ka-h-ru-yan*
3sg-EMPH in.turn 3sg-R-nose-release-PP 3sg-R-cry-FUT

122 *duway-no-yih*
husband-3sg.POSS-ERG

“This one (the woman) rejected his flowers. So this one in turn [gestures to man on screen], he **is ?shedding tears, he’s crying**, her husband.”

In example (39) below, disambiguation is not a plausible explanation given that *kirdikird kinikun-yih* ‘the other woman’, as the only noun phrase in its intonation unit, and immediately preceding the verb, is the only candidate for the S argument position. Neither does the context provide any strong ground for positing emphasis based on the referent’s stance. On the other hand, *kirdikird kinikun-yih* does constitute a new, interfering topic, which suggests a discourse function observed for multivalent clauses (as in §3.1). In line 086, the speaker is commenting the actions of the younger brother protagonist, who, being the main character of the film, is highly topical. In line 087, the speaker shifts to describe the attitude of one of the secondary female protagonists, and subsequently flags her as an interfering referent using *-yih*.

(39) 20120710b_003_MT 087 – 092 [Ten Canoes 2/6]

086 *bah mak ka-bo-niyan*
CNJ NEG 3sg-go-FUT

087 *kanh mah kirdikird kinikun-yih ka-h-merey-di*
D.ID CNJ **woman other-ERG 3sg-R-jealous-stand:PR**

088 *buka-h-koh-na-n kahnunh*
3sg>3sg.h-R-gaze-see-PR D.ID

“But he (the young man) can’t go (to the women’s camp), and **that woman, that other one** is jealous, **she’s** looking at him...”

These examples of *-yih* on emotion verbs are somewhat puzzling: why is it that *-yih* selects predicates in this specific semantic class, and why do they draw (in a relatively small number of tokens) from functions described for both the verb root *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’, and for multivalent verb roots? As with *yin*, these emotion verbs typically entail more participants than is specified by the formal valency, involving an Experiencer (person afflicted), and a Stimulus (the source). This is illustrated in example (40) for *kodj-dadjmu* ‘to sulk, to be upset’, where the man (Experiencer) is sulking and upset

at the woman (the Stimulus). Being similar in animacy and topicality, participants in these emotion-verb examples may compete with each other for local topichood, such that *-yih* is required as a tool for clarification, or contrastive emphasis.

(40) 20120705b_001_MT 054 – 056 [Mind Reading Emotion Library]

054 *kirdikird-no ka-h-bo-ng*
 woman-3sg.POSS 3sg-R-go-PR

055 *duway-no-yih bonj ka-h-dja-worhdi*
husband-3sg.POSS-ERG well **3sg-R-FOC-stand:PR**

056 *ka-h-kodj-dadj-minj*
3sg-R-head-cut-PP

“The wife leaves. The **husband**, well, **he** just stands there, **he**’s upset.”

Similarly, events described with *mercy-di* ‘to be jealous, over-controlling as a result, often used in the context of love/sexual/conjugal relationships’ (Ponsonnet 2014a) often have a complex semantic entailment, subcategorising for three human participants: an Experiencer (the jealous one), and two Stimuli (the object of jealousy, and the one that the jealousy is directed towards). Interestingly, just as *yin* ‘to say’ can be semantically equivalent to two formally transitive verbs (*marnu-yin* and *yinmiwon*), *mercy-di* (lit. ‘jealous+stand/be’) also has formally transitive relatives: *mercy-nan* (lit. ‘jealous+SEE’), and *njerrh-ye-mercy-di* (lit. ‘(dead.)body+COM+jealous+stand/be’²⁶). With these semantic considerations in mind, our best hypothesis for the co-occurrence of *-yih* and emotion verb relates to their semantic transitivity as verbs requiring more participants than are lexically coded. This would explain why they are targeted by *-yih* in similar circumstances as with *yin*, another “pseudo-transitive” verb root, and also in similar circumstances as multivalent clauses, with which they compare semantically. It is also interesting to note that emotion verbs (along with *yin* for reported speech and thought) encode uniquely human (high-animate) traits – further research comparing case-marking patterns on these “high-animate verbs” could reveal the extent that case-marking is assigned on a lexical semantic basis.

²⁶ Although the thematic *di* usually forms monovalent verbs, the compound verb *njerrh-ye-mercy-di* attracts transitive person prefixes (see Ponsonnet 2014a:173). This could be due to the presence of *ye-*, if this is interpreted as a comitative applicative – but it is not clear what the comitative argument would then be, and the form *ye-* could have other origins (see Evans 2006). In any case, irregularities in the valence of thematics are not exceptional in Dalabon.

4. Conclusions

Following observations on other languages where “optional ergative markers” have been described (McGregor 1998; 2006; 2010; Verstraete 2010; Hyslop 2010; Rumsey 2010; DeLancey 2011), we have argued that the case-marker *-yih* is conditioned by discourse and pragmatic factors beyond its restriction to marking A arguments of multivalent clauses. For both multivalent and monovalent clauses, the distribution of *-yih* can be explained by a co-dependent analysis of discourse and pragmatic functions. The discourse function of *-yih* relates that a non-topical A argument may (and often will) be marked if it is sufficiently threatening to the construal of local topics. These referents may also be targeted by the case-marker’s pragmatic function, if those participants are being construed as acting contrary to other (topical) referents, or to the expectations of the interlocutors. The occurrence of *-yih* on monovalent clauses is comparatively limited, but not insignificant. The marker prevails on clauses headed by the verb root *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’, and occurs sporadically with a handful of emotion verb roots, which, similar to *yin*, may involve more than one human participant and invite semantically transitive interpretations. In monovalent *yin* clauses, *-yih* serves a disambiguating (discourse) function, reaffirming the topical referent (the speaker or thinker) after a long period of deferred topichood. It may also confer pragmatic emphasis: when attached to a speaker referent, it draws attention to their stance and/or speech content. Absolutive arguments of emotion clauses appear to be able to afford any of the functions described for clauses with *yin*, as well as those functions attested for multivalent clauses. Collectively, these functions of the case marker *-yih*, across all types of clauses, accord with McGregor’s Expected Actor Principle (1998:516).

The distribution of this case marker clearly indicates that the multivalent occurrences are historically prior, and monovalent occurrences are more recent extensions. Although it is not possible to provide a detailed account of how this came to be, we hypothesise that Dalabon speakers may have started to use *-yih* on semantically transitive monovalent clauses with *yin* ‘to say, to think, to do’ because this verb is often used as a framing device for complex discourse structures that require disambiguation of the speaker referent. Indeed, the pragmatic functions of *-yih* on monovalent clauses seem to correspond to those pragmatic functions for multivalent clauses, though specific to their functional demands (e.g. framing reported speech for *yin*). The semantic transitivity of certain *yin* clauses may also have influenced the extensions of *-yih* to emotion verbs; being also semantically transitive, their arguments may require disambiguation, especially when the description of emotions involve several human participants.

These observations conform with those analyses of “ergative” case-markers that are not strictly regimented by their syntactic function: not only can *-yih* mark the S argument, it will only mark the A argument if specific criteria are met, and even then, only if the speaker chooses to do so. These “lax” criteria do retain some definition of ergativity: it will never mark the O argument, and the S argument

is marked for somewhat different reasons, but with our observations in mind (corroborating with those on other languages), we can see that the distribution of the “optional ergative” marker *-yih* owes significantly to its discourse utility, and corresponding pragmatic extensions.

Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to Maggie Tukumba, who provided most of the data for this article and many others on Dalabon, and who sadly passed away as we were working on our final draft. We are also immensely grateful to the other Dalabon speakers who contributed data to this article. Finally, we extend our thanks to our two reviewers, and Jean-Christophe Verstraete, who all gave invaluable advice in the preparation of this draft.

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Appendices

A. Glossary

1. *Glossing Abbreviations*

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Term</i>
>	“subject” (left) acting on “object” (right)
?	uncertain gloss / translation
1	first-person exclusive
12	first-person inclusive
2	second-person
3	third-person
ABL	ablative
ALL	allative
APPR	apprehensive
BEN	benefactive applicative
COM	comitative applicative
CNJ	conjunction
du	dual
DY	dyad
D.here	demonstrative; referent in the here-space
D.ID	demonstrative; identified referent
D.UNF	demonstrative; unfamiliar referent
EMPH	emphatic
ERG	ergative
FOC	focus
FILL	filler morpheme

FUT	future
GEN	genitive
h	high animate
INCH	inchoative
INSTR	instrumental
INTJ	interjection
IRR	irrealis
LOC	locative
MASC	masculine
NEG	negator
pl	plural
POSS	possessive
PP	past perfective
PR	present
PRIV	privative
PURP	purposive
R	realis
REDUP	reduplicant
RR	reciprocal/reflexive
sg	singular
SEQ	sequential
SUB	subordinate
VBLSR	verbaliser

2. *Speakers*

<i>Initials</i>	<i>Name</i>
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MP	Maïa Ponsonnet
LB	†Lily Bennett
MT	†Maggie Tukumba
ND	†Nikibini Darluk
QB	Queenie Brennan

3. *Recordings*

<i>Recording File Code</i>	<i>Prose Label</i>
20100720b_009_MT	Narr
20100722b_003_MT	Husband and Wife 1/4
20100722b_004_MT	Husband and Wife 2/4
20110518a_002_QB	Whistle duck story
20110519b_001_LB_ND	Narrative about the Stolen Generation
20110521b_003_MT	Jackal & Crow (MT)
20110526b_001_MT	ContEl
20110529_003_MT	Personal Narrative
20110601_003_MT	Personal Narrative
20110605_002_LB_ND	Jackal & Crow (LB_ND)
20110614_007_LB	Picture Series B
20111206a_003_MT	ContEl
20120705b_001_MT	Mind Reading Emotion Library
20120706b_002_MT	Narrative about drinking practices
20120707a_000_MT	Stim
20120707b_000_MT	Car Accident
20120708b_000_MT	Personal Narrative
20120708b_006_MT	Narrative about community conflict
20120710a_002_MT	Ten Canoes 1/6
20120710b_003_MT	Ten Canoes 2/6

B. Sample of verbs

Table 6 below shows the proportions of various transitive verb roots extracted from the corpus (see sections 2.4, 3) with the intention of calculating the rate of ergative case-marking, with semantic transitivity as a variable. The proportions in each column show, from left to right: the number of tokens with *-yih*, and the number of tokens with an overt A argument (including those with case-marking), both as a percentage of the total number of tokens.

Group	Verb root	A- <i>yih</i>	any A	Total
'hit'	<i>bun</i> 'to hit, to kill'	4	13	66
	<i>dalhmu</i> 'to punch'	0	0	1
	<i>duyhmu</i> 'to strike'	1	1	2
	<i>yamu</i> 'to spear'	3	8	40
	TOTAL:	8 7.34%	22 20.18%	109
'see'	<i>malk-nan</i> 'to watch secretly'	1	3	13
	<i>merey-nan</i> 'to be jealous'	1	1	6
	<i>nan</i> 'to look, to look after'	8	36	201
	<i>ye-nan</i> 'to look at someone with something'	2	3	11
	TOTAL:	12 5.19%	43 18.61%	231
'put'	<i>munku-yung</i> 'to send away'	0	2	12
	<i>yung</i> 'to put, to place (a landscape feature)'	5	14	60
	TOTAL:	5 6.94%	16 22.22%	72
'get'	<i>be-yung</i> 'to fetch'	0	1	11
	<i>djirdmang</i> 'to steal'	1	2	5
	<i>kan</i> 'to take, to carry'	10	29	75
	<i>mang</i> 'to get'	4	20	74
	<i>yemang</i> 'to grasp, to steal'	3	5	20
	TOTAL:	18 9.73%	57 30.81%	185
'give'	<i>ngabbun</i> 'to give'	3	11	52
	<i>wadda-yung</i> 'to give in marriage'	0	1	4
	TOTAL:	3 5.36%	12 21.43%	56
	TOTAL of V₊ tokens:	46 7.04%	150 22.97%	653

Table 6: Summary of multivalent verb roots surveyed in data.

The same calculations were performed on clauses headed by yin ‘to say, to think, to do’ in particular. In Table 7, tokens are separated by valency, to test whether or not this affects ergative case-marking (see §4.3).

Group	Verb root	Sp-yih	with Sp	Total
yin	V ₁ : yin	15 4.49%	56 16.77%	334 [100%]
	V ₊ : marnu-yin, yinmiwon	12 6.15%	35 17.95%	195 [100%]
	TOTAL:	27 5.10%	91 17.20%	529 [100%]

Table 7: Summary of tokens of verb root yin ‘to say, to think, to do’ and derived multivalent forms marnu-yin and yinmiwon ‘to tell’.

C. Stimulus material

1. Jackal and Crow picture task (Carroll, Kelly & Gawne 2011)



(read top to bottom, left to right)

2. *Mind Reading Emotion Library* (Baron-Cohen 2004)



1. The man offers the flower to the woman.



2. The man is visibly sad after the woman rejects his gift.