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Abstract:

As in a number of ergative languages (e.g. Basque, Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Kâte, Ku Waru, some varieties of Tibetan), in Warrwa the ergative marker *-na ~ -ma* is occasionally found on the subject of intransitive clauses, indeed even on the subject of verbless clauses. I argue that the presence vs. absence of the ergative marker in this environment is not random free variation, but is motivated and highly constrained. The paper is concerned with identifying the motivations. It is proposed, based on an investigation of uses in a corpus of narrative and other texts, that two features are relevant: (a) semantic — the subject is highly agentive; and (b) referential — the identity of the subject is not predictable: it is unexpected. Use of the ergative on an intransitive subject thus highlights the agentivity and unexpectedness of the subject. I argue that, contrary to recent claims by some authors (e.g. Dixon 2004), Warrwa is not an active language: it is not the case that *-na ~ -ma* groups together some intransitive and transitive subjects, while zero marking groups some intransitive subjects with transitive objects; these groupings are, I argue, purely formal and epiphenomenal. Finally, I situate optional marking of intransitive subjects in Warrwa in a wider theory of optional case marking (as per McGregor 2006).

References

- Dixon, Robert M.W. 2002. *Australian languages: their nature and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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