

A Grammar Of Wambaya, Northern Australia

Felicity Meakins

**From absolutely optional to only nominally ergative:
the life cycle of the Gurindji ergative suffix**

1 Introduction

The borrowing of case, in either form or pattern, has been observed only rarely in cross-linguistic studies of language contact, compared with the borrowing of other lexical and morphological material. Very few instances of the transfer of case morphology have been given in the literature, with the notable exception of a number of Australian studies (Heath 1976; Disbray and Simpson 2005; Meakins 2011a; O'Shannessy 2011; Hamilton 2013) and an American study (Mithun 2005). More instances of pattern borrowings exist, where a shift in case alignment has occurred as a result of convergence with a case system from a different language (see Aikhenvald and Dixon 2006, 2001; Matras and Sakel 2007, for various studies). The higher number of case realignments versus morphological case borrowings suggests that the transfer of case forms and case patterns are not necessarily related. Indeed, as Aikhenvald (2006: 15) suggests, the borrowing of a case pattern does not entail that actual morphemes have been borrowed. Whether the reverse is true has not been previously examined, no doubt because few examples of case form borrowings have been observed. Such a situation occurred in the genesis of the mixed language, Gurindji Kriol (Australia), whose sources are Gurindji (Ngumpin Yapa, Pama-Nyungan) and Kriol (an English-lexifier creole). During the formation of Gurindji Kriol, the Gurindji ergative suffix (along with the dative, locative, allative and ablative case suffixes, other nominal morphology and lexical material) fused with the Kriol verb system, a process which resulted in a case system different from both Gurindji and Kriol.

The borrowing of the Gurindji ergative suffix is one of the rare instances of case transfer reported in the literature (Meakins 2009, 2011b; Meakins and O'Shannessy 2010; O'Shannessy and Meakins 2012). According to Meakins and O'Shannessy, this borrowing precipitated two major changes. First, the Gurindji ergative marker underwent a functional shift to marking discourse prominence, specifically highlighting the agentivity of transitive subjects. Second, a change in case alignment occurred. Gurindji Kriol is an optional ergative language, a clear divergence from both the ergative-absolutive system of Gurindji and the nominative-accusative system of Kriol. Nonetheless, this analysis of case transfer and alignment shift in Gurindji Kriol is complicated

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