The Majang Language

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Part III: Basic Syntax

The grammatical part of this language description is divided into three major sections. *Part IV: Morphology* introduces the various forms encountered in the Majang language, whereas *Part V: Other Syntactic and Pragmatic Topics* provides a detailed account of how the Majang language creates larger grammatical structures, mostly from a functional perspective. But before introducing the forms and structures, this preliminary part III is needed, which sets the context by presenting the various systems that contribute to the understanding of the information structure in the clause. The following concepts need to be discussed in some detail, so that they can be used in the succeeding parts IV and V: topicality, differential ergative marking, differential-S marking, pre-verbal and post-verbal case marking (and other aspects of basic constituent order typology), the conjoint- and disjoint distinction, and the sentence-final topicality marker (*SFT*). Each of these is introduced in the following sections and subsections.

This means that these concepts have to be introduced without detailed information on forms and paradigms; sufficient information is given to show that indeed there is a justification for the establishment of these concepts, but all formal and structural details are introduced in the following parts IV and V. This hopefully reduces any repetition to a necessary minimum.

III.1 Topicality

One of the most salient features of the Majang language is that it divides most nominal constituents of a clause into either topical or non-topical constituents. Topicality is crucial for the grammar, as the differential case marking of *A* and *S* (see section III.2.1.2) is determined by the discourse-pragmatic function of topicality. This means that syntactic and pragmatic factors operate on the same morphological category of case marking. Other morpho-syntactic devices, such as the conjoint-disjoint distinction (see section III.3) and the placement of the sentence-final topicality marker (*SFT*, see section III.4), are also determined by topicality.

The concept of *topicality* has been used with a range of meanings by past and present linguists, and it is important to clarify how it is to be used in this language description. Andrews (1985, p. 77) provides a helpful overview of how *topicality* was defined in the previous literature: topicality is equated sometimes with givenness, or with aboutness, or with definiteness, or with specificity, or with background, or with the point of view of the speaker, or, finally, with salience properties such as animacy, humanness, or first-personhood. The definition with reference to aboutness was frequently applied by linguists, as it has a close relationship with the concept of *topic*, as developed by Li (1976) or Lambrecht (1994, p. 131), who defines topics as follows: *"A referent is interpreted as the topic of a proposition if in a given situation the proposition is construed as being about this referent."*

This propositional definition of topics cannot be applied to explain phenomena such as differential case marking, *SFT*-assignment or conjoint-disjoint marking in Majang, as it excludes instances of constituents that need to be seen as topical by the way in which they behave syntactically. According to Lambrecht's definition each non-thetical proposition is expected to have one topic, which is why he calls them sentence topics or clause topics (p. 117). But in Majang there can be more or less than one topical constituent in a proposition. More encompassing and therefore more helpful in the case of Majang are definitions of topicality making use of the other factors listed by Andrews – they describe what Lambrecht calls *discourse topics* (p. 117).

Givón (1990, p. 902ff) provides one of these discourse-oriented definitions, identifying the following factors that affect the topicality of a given noun phrase (NP):

a) referential accessibility – if there is a lot of context that allows the presupposition of a given NP, this NP has a high topicality. This context can be provided by the speech situation as deictic context, or by the cultural knowledge as generically shared context, or by the text itself in the preceding discourse.

b) thematic importance – an NP that refers to an entity or participant that has a great impact regarding the development of the discourse has a high topicality. The referent or concept named by such an NP will be mentioned frequently in the discourse.

A definition of topicality along Givón's lines would therefore include Andrew's parameters of givenness, specificity, or definiteness. But it turns out that it is necessary to go beyond Givón's definition and to adopt McGregor's

(2010, p. 1622) concept of *expectedness* as a defining parameter – an agent NP in the Australian optional-ergative languages Gooniyandi and Warrwa is *not* showing ergative morphology when it is *expected* to fill the agent role of a clause. Expectedness according to McGregor entails the idea of givenness, specificity and definiteness for agent participants; the higher an NP's value for these variables, the more expected it is to fill the role of *A*. It is my claim that discourse topicality is perceived by Majang speakers and hearers in similar ways, and that this is not just restricted to the case-assignment for *S* and *A*. The following definition of topicality is assumed to hold in Majang:

> *An NP is topical when its referent is expected – based on the discourse context – as a filler of its particular grammatical role.*

To illustrate the application of this definition, in the narrative of Dog and Donkey (section VI.1.1), the third important participant of the story, Hyena, is first mentioned in a background clause alerting the audience to his presence:

Example III.1: introduction of an important participant

nè	**ɓáᴸ**	**càːdíᴸ**	**ɓákᴸ**	**làkè**	**dʊ̀ŋédᴸ.**
nè	**ɓáᴸ**	**càːdíᴸ**	**ɓákᴸ**	**làk-è**	**dʊ̀ŋédᴸ**
CONJ	*REMPST*	*there*	*REF\REMPST*	*have-IMPS.CJ*	*hyena\SG.ABS*

There was a hyena at that place.

Not surprisingly, being mentioned for the first time, Hyena has no givenness or accessibility as a participant, and therefore is coded as non-topical (being the object of an impersonal verb that in this construction serves as an existential marker). The non-topicality is shown by the use of the conjoint form (see section III.3) on the verb. This introduction of a participant as a *P* is consistent with observations made by Du Bois (1987, p. 827) according to his concept of *Preferred Argument Structure*.

The next mention of Hyena is in a speech clause uttered by Dog, who warns his friend Donkey about Hyena's existence.

Example III.2: introduction of a participant in a speech clause

làkè	**ídĩtᴸ**	**cìnɔ̀**	**kɔ́ːᴸ**	**tínáᴸ**	**mèlkí**	**ŋɔ́nk,**	**ídĩtᴸ**	**cìnɔ̀**	**rìjɛ́ᴸ**	**kɛ́**	**dʊ̀ŋédĩk.**
làk-è		**ídĩtᴸ**		**cì-n-ɔ̀**		**kɔ́ːᴸ**		**tín-áᴸ**		**mèl-kí**	
have-IMPS.CJ		*person\SG.ABS*		*REL-SG-PROX*		*NEARFUT*		*1P-DAT*		*arrive-CP.3S.DJ*	
ŋɔ́nk	**ídĩtᴸ**		**cì-n-ɔ̀**		**rìj-ɛ́ᴸ**		**kɛ́**	**dʊ̀ŋédᴸ=k**			
SUB	*person\SG.ABS*		*REL-SG-PROX*		*call-IMPS.DJ*		*QUOT*	*hyena\SG.ABS=SUB*			

There is someone who is coming to us, someone called Hyena.

Although this is already the second mention of Hyena in the narrative, it is the first time that Donkey hears about him. Donkey is the fictional hearer of this clause, and for him Hyena is not yet a given participant. In the direct quote, Hyena is coded in the absolutive case as object of an impersonal verb *'called'*. The topicality status of **dʊ̀ŋɛ́d** cannot be established by morphosyntactic means, but the referent is first referred to by the absolutive NP **ídɪ́t^{L}** that is identified by the preceding conjoint verb form as being not topical.

The next mention of Hyena is again syntactically ambiguous:

Example III.3: first reference to an important participant

nè ɛ̀ːŋádɪ̂r dʊ̀ŋɛ́d^{L} à jòwéːdɪ̂ːŋ.

nè	**ɛ̀ːŋád-ɪ̂r**	**dʊ̀ŋɛ́d^{L}**	**à**	**jòwéːdɪ́ː=ŋ**
CONJ	*smell-CF.3S*	*hyena\SG.ABS*	CONJ	*far\3S=SFT*

He (Dog) smelled Hyena far away.

Hyena again shows up in the absolutive form **dʊ̀ŋɛ́d^{L}**. It is not at the end of the sentence, so the *SFT*-clitic (see section III.4) cannot be applied. The preceding verb also does not distinguish between conjoint or disjoint (see section III.3). These two diagnostic devices often help to distinguish between topical and non-topical use. But by now Hyena has been established as an important and somewhat threatening entity, so he is not unexpected as the filler of the *P* slot of a verb of sensing. Therefore, Hyena is topical in this sentence, alongside the equally topical *A* Dog, who is not expressed beyond indexing on the verb in this clause. This analysis by conjecture is confirmed when shortly afterwards Hyena himself appears on the scene, becoming an activated participant, "activated" or "active" meaning to be *"currently lit up, a concept in a person's focus of consciousness at a particular moment"* (Chafe, 1987, p. 22ff).

Example III.4: reference to an activated participant

nè mɛ̀lkí dʊ́ŋɛ́^{L} nɛ̀ːkɛ̂ːŋ.

nè	**mɛ̀l-kí**	**dʊ́ŋɛ́^{L}**	**nɛ̀ːk-ɛ́=ŋ**
CONJ	*arrive-CP.3S.DJ*	*hyena\SG.NOM.MOD*	*POSS\3S.SG-NOM=SFT*

Hyena himself came.

In this clause Hyena appears as *S*, garbed in its shorter nominative form, the case form that applies to all kinds of topical subjects. The case is confirmed by the unambiguous nominative case marking on the following possessive pronoun which serves in this example to provide a strong definite reference, and by the use of the *SFT*-clitic (see section III.4) on the NP headed by **dʊ́ŋɛ́^{L}**.

Without these other clues, the form might also be interpreted as marked by the ergative case. From this point onward, almost to the end of the narrative, Hyena is either only mentioned by indexing on the verb, or in a few places by the nominative case form. He has become an activated participant that only needs to be mentioned as an NP when the subject of a clause changes (it goes back and forth between Dog and Hyena). Then, at the very climax of the story, Hyena once more shows up as a non-topical NP:

Example III.5: topicality not marked on an accessible participant

nè kàwè dʊ̀ŋédᴸ cìnè ɓákᴸ kó:múc né:k à ɓòkòtî:r dákɛ́:dâ.
nè kàw-è dʊ̀ŋédᴸ cì-n-è ɓákᴸ kó:múc né:k
CONJ *bite-3S.CJ hyena\SG.ABS DEM-SG-HR REF\REMPST muzzle\SG.ABS POSS\3S.SG.ABS*
à ɓòkòt-î:r dákɛ́:dâ
CONJ *kill-CF.3S only*
He bit that aforementioned Hyena on its muzzle, only until he killed (it).

In this example Hyena appears as the *P* of the clause in the absolutive case; somewhat surprisingly, though, the use of the conjoint marking (see section III.3) on the preceding verb '*bite*' clearly shows Hyena to be non-topical. It should not be assumed that by this time the accessibility of Hyena has waned – he is still an activated participant at this point in the narrative; but the speaker chooses to mark the NP '*hyena*' as non-topical. This is in line with the previously introduced definition of topicality that makes use of the concept of *expectedness*: Hyena turns out to be the unexpected object of killing violence; the unexpectedness of this participant in the *P* role overrides its discourse accessibility in the evaluation of its topicality.

These examples were picked to show that there are some factors that for most clauses explain from the pragmatic context why a particular topicality status is placed on a given NP. The last example makes it clear that topicality in Majang is not entirely defined by factors such as accessibility and thematic importance, as proposed by Givón (1990, p. 902ff). Apparently the choice of the speaker can be influenced by other factors as well, and here I make use of the concept of *expectedness*, as introduced by McGregor (2010, p. 1622), in the language-specific definition of Majang topicality. This can only be a preliminary assessment. More research on a wider textual basis will lead to a clearer understanding, and even this will eventually be subject to the deliberate choice of a speaker to assign or not assign topicality in a given situation, based on factors arising from the pragmatic context of the utterance (compare McGregor's (2010, p. 1624) explanation for his example 17).

New participants are introduced as non-topical in all analyzed narrative texts (it should be possible to introduce well-known participants as topical, though). Nominal predicates (section V.3.2.1) are always coded as non-topical in the analyzed data, but the existence of topical predicates cannot be excluded, given the shortage of data.

It is important to remember that the concept of topicality in Majang cannot be equated with the pragmatic category of *topic* as introduced in the typology proposed by Li and Thompson (1976, p. 483ff). Majang is not a topic-prominent language according to this typology, as topicality in Majang never competes with the subject in its primary role of structuring the clause. Also, as seen in example III.3, it is possible to have two or more topical entities in a Majang clause, or none in a thetical clause, whereas topic-prominent languages identify exactly one topic per clause, which serves as the syntactic pivot. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Majang language does not meet many of the eight criteria (Li & Thompson, 1976, pp. 466–471) defining a topic-prominent language. Majang must be classified as a subject-prominent language, but one in which topical constituents have a great impact on the syntactic configuration of the clause.

III.2 Case Marking on Central Constituents

For the central constituents of a clause *A* (transitive agent), *S* (intransitive subject) and *P* (patient, object)[27] three case forms are found in Majang: the absolutive marks *P* and non-topical *S*, the ergative marks non-topical *A*, and the nominative case is used for topical *A* and *S*.

III.2.1 Morphological ergative-absolutive structures

If one goes by the sample of languages perused by Nichols (1992), then one would expect the African continent to be entirely devoid of languages making use of absolutive-ergative alignment systems (Nichols, 1992, p. 31). Palmer, too, with the data available to him at about the same time, was forced to state that *"Africa seems to be the only major area where there are no lan-*

[27] With the use of the letters *S*, *A* and *P* here and from now on I follow Comrie's (1978) notation for central clause constituents.

guages with an ergative system" (Palmer, 1994, p. 199). But since then, a number of Nilo-Saharan languages spoken in and around Sudan have been observed to display such structures; see for example Miller & Gilley (2001) or Andersen (1988). Schröder (2006) and chapter 3 in König (2008) provide further discussions of ergativity in Africa[28].

Although it does not become clear from the literature analyzing the Majang language in this respect, Majang may be the African language which most clearly displays the features of a morphological ergative-absolutive alignment system. This fact was already hinted at by myself (Joswig, 2015, 2016). The following sections share some of the material in these works, but provide a very different analysis of the observed facts.

Having an ergative-absolutive alignment system means that the *S* of an intransitive clause is marked in the same way (absolutive) as the *P* of a transitive clause. The *A* of a transitive clause is marked in a different way (ergative).

The Majang data in example III.6, presented by Randal (2000, p. 72), has generated some discussion in the literature on African case marking. Schröder (2006, p. 106) is inclined to accept this evidence at face value, seeing Majang as a language with ergative structures.

Example III.6: evidence for ergativity as cited by Randal and Schröder

a) **ùtú-kọ**[29] **táng-ǹg** **máaw.**
drink-PST *cow-ERG* *water*
The cow drank water.

b) **Dám-kò** **táng.**
eat-PST *cow*
It ate a cow.

c) **rér-kò** **táng.**
die-PST *cow*
The cow died.

[28] Schröder's claim that the presence of an antipassive construction proves the previous existence of an ergative system does not stand up to the empirical evidence (Janic, 2013).

[29] The *PST* suffix **-kö** is a typo in Schröder's rendering of this example. I have used Randal's transcription and glossing here, with an underlined **ọ** representing the vowel **ɔ, ng** for the nasal **ŋ**, and **D** for the implosive **ɗ**. The failure to note the correct **ọ** on the *PST*-marker in examples b) and c) already goes back to Randal.

König (2006, p. 698, 2008, p. 190f) rather follows Unseth (1989b), who analyses Majang as a marked-nominative language. In the following it will be shown that although Randal's and Schröder's analysis rests on faulty data (there is no ergative marker **-ŋ** in Majang), their basic assumption is correct: Majang *does* have a well-developed ergative-absolutive case marking system.

The identical morphological marking of *P* and *S* is called *absolutive case*, whereas the marking of *A* is called *ergative case*. This is illustrated by the following clauses:

Example III.7: ergative-absolutive case marking

a) **ɓòkòtú kó:kô táŋ^{L}.**
ɓòkòt-í kó:kô táŋ^{L}
kill-3S.DJ snake\SG.ERG cow\SG.ABS
A snake kills a cow.

b) **ɓòkòtú tâŋ kó:kó^{L}.**
ɓòkòt-í tâŋ kó:kó^{L}.
kill-3S.DJ cow\SG.ERG snake\SG.ABS
A cow kills a snake.

c) **ŋá:rîr kó:kó^{L}.**
ŋá:r-îr kó:kó^{L}
go-CF.3S snake\SG.ABS
A snake goes away.

The ergative form of **kó:kó^{L}** *'snake'* is achieved by placing a low tone on the last stem syllable, resulting in **kó:kô** *'snake\SG.ERG'* with a falling (*HL*) tone. The ergative form **tâŋ** *'cow\SG.ERG'* makes use of this same low tone. The section on ergative case in section IV.1.3.2 gives more details on how ergative case marking is manifested in the language. This case form is exclusively used for coding *A*, whereas both *S* and *P* use the same forms **kó:kó^{L}** and **táŋ^{L}**, which are called absolutive.

Such a state of affairs is best analyzed by assuming an ergative-absolutive alignment system for the Majang language, although the following sections present some necessary adjustments to this picture. Ergative-absolutive constructions are actually very rarely found in natural texts, as particularly the ergative case is usually replaced by its topical counterpart *nominative*. Less frequently, the absolutive case also makes way for the nominative.

This is not the place to discuss when and how an ergative system could develop in Majang (and a good number of other Eastern-Sudanic languages). For now it suffices to refer to Dimmendaal (2017, p. 466), who discusses and rejects the idea that ergativity results from areal contact with Afro-Asiatic (mostly Omotic) marked-nominative languages. Section III.2.2.2 further investigates the ways in which Majang crucially differs from the marked-nominative systems found in other Surmic languages (Dimmendaal, 2014), where two different case marking patterns are encountered in the pre-verbal and post-verbal position. Ergative and nominative case on Majang possessive pronouns is marked by the suffix **-ɛ** (see section IV.3.1.4), that very well may have its origin in the locative-instrumental case marker of the same form, one of the two sources suggested by Dimmendaal (2014, p. 10) for marked nominative and/or ergative in Eastern-Sudanic languages. Section IV.1.3.3 further investigates a possible morphological source for the different pragmatically governed case markers, the secondary suffixes[30] found in various Nilotic languages.

III.2.1.1 Syntactic properties of noun phrases in transitive clauses

Having established that morphologically Majang displays a strong absolutive-ergative pattern, it needs to be seen whether this ergativity goes beyond the mere morphological case placement on nouns. The literature on ergativity suggests that most languages with morphological ergative systems do not display any syntactic ergative structures (Anderson, 1976, p. 11; Givón, 1984, p. 165 f; Andrews, 1985, p. 130; Dik, 1989, p. 243 f; VanValin & LaPolla, 1997, p. 580). Very few languages, such as Dyirbal, treat the *P* as the subject of the clause according to syntactic criteria, such as subject agreement on the verb or use as the pivot in multi-clause constructions. Where this happens, Dik (1989, p. 244) sees such languages not as the typical ergative system, but as a transitional stage, in which the passive construction of a nominative-accusative language has become the unmarked construction through a markedness shift. Instead, Dik views languages with a morphological ergative-absolutive system, but a syntactic behavior along the lines of nominative-accusative languages, as the *"most usual sort of ergative language"*.

Majang is a language in which ergativity mostly works on the morphological level. For all syntactic purposes, *A* functions as the syntactically privileged

[30] So called by Tucker & Bryan (1962).

argument of a transitive clause. The most obvious manifestation of this is in the verb agreement – in every transitive clause the subject indexing on the verb agrees with *A*, that is with the constituent marked by the nominative or ergative. In the following example, the verb agrees with the ergative-plural *A*, not with the absolutive-marked singular NP referring to *P*.

Example III.8: *A* agreement on the verb

díléŕk kúr꜌ójɛ̀ːk wàːjǎːn.

díl-érk	**kúr꜌ój-ɛ̀ːk**	**wàːjǎːn**
carry-3P.CP	*donkey-PL.ERG*	*plant\SG.ABS*

Donkeys bring a plant.

Dixon (1994, p. 94f) calls this state of affairs *"bound" vs. "free" split*, predicting that if any split at all happens in this respect, it would affect verb-agreement systems as is observed in Majang: *"We would expect them to be on a nominative-accusative pattern."*

Other syntactic properties of a subject (in the sense of the syntactically privileged argument) would be the ability to work as the *pivot* (VanValin & LaPolla, 1997, p. 275) in multi-clause constructions; the pivot argument only needs to be expressed in the matrix clause, but does not need to be overtly expressed in the subordinate or subsequent clause. Such tests cannot be easily applied in Majang, as the *S/A* is *always* expressed by argument indexation on the verb, and there is therefore no real gapping in Majang.[31]

But there is one place in Majang where the absolutive case marking controls another syntactic distinction: the conjoint marking on the verb requires the noun immediately following a verb to be in the absolutive case, regardless of its syntactic status as *S* or *P* (see section III.3).

III.2.1.2 Differential ergative marking

Many languages with morphological ergative-absolutive case marking do not have ergative-absolutive alignment in all possible contexts. If a language displays an ergative-absolutive pattern in one context, and a nominative-accusative pattern in another, the language is said to have split alignment (Comrie, 1989, p. 110), for which Dixon (1994, Chapter 4) attempted to

[31] The example I had presented to this effect (Joswig, 2016, p. 473f) is troublesome in this and other ways, particularly because the *A* of the whole sentence was misanalysed as ergative, when it was, in fact, in the nominative case.

establish universal criteria. These will need to be discussed for their applicability in Majang, as in this language, too, split phenomena can be observed beyond the already mentioned verb-indexation versus post-verbal case-marking split. But it will become clear that these split phenomena are quite different from split phenomena in other ergative languages, and that it is better to describe the data in terms of differential ergative marking (DEM), as proposed by McGregor (2010, p. 1614f).

Practically all examples involving the ergative case are from elicited language data. Looking at Majang narrative texts, it is very difficult to find clear examples of the ergative case. The only two unambiguous examples that I was able to find in my corpus of well-analyzed texts are the following:

Example III.9: ergative case found in narrative discourse

a) **nè cà:dí^{L} ɓéɲ òmáltè dènɛ́ wà:lô:k gòpàn wɛ́j^{L} lè:rík.**
nè **cà:dí^{L}** **ɓéɲ** **òm-áltè**
CONJ *then* *day*\SG.LOC *one-LOC*
dèn-ɛ́ **wà:lô:k** **gòpàn** **wɛ́j^{L}** **lè:r-k**
see-3S.DJ *Waalook*\ERG *path*\SG.ABS *house*\SG.ABS *Leer-POSS*
Then, one day, Waalook saw the path to Leer's house.

b) **ɟàrtí ná:k, dâm kɔ́ ɟìkónt?**
ɟàrtí **ná:k** **dâm** **kɔ́** **ɟìkónt**
woman\SG.ABS *POSS**1*S.SG.ABS *eat**3*S.DJ *RECPST* *what*\ERG
My woman, what ate her?

In these examples, the *A* of the transitive clause is marked by the ergative case, as evidenced by the *HL* sequence on the last syllable of the proper name in example a), and by the special ergative form of the interrogative pronoun (see p. 387 for the other case forms of this pronoun) in example b). In example a), the ergative is chosen for a main participant following a reset of time and place, and with a different subject than in the previous clause. In example b) the ergative is used for a question word asking for an unknown subject; the object of this clause is left-dislocated (see section V.7.1.2) to a position outside the clause. A less clear example shows an NP in the ambiguous form that is identical for both the modified nominative and the modified ergative:

Example III.10: textual example with ergative case assumed by word order

àgútᴸ cìnɔ̀ kánᴸ ɓòkòtìːɗ ɗúŋéᴸ cìnè càːkómᴸ néːkík,
àgútᴸ cìnɔ̀ kánᴸ ɓòkòt-iːɗ ɗúŋéᴸ
because *MEDPST* *kill\RELPST.3S* *hyena\SG.ERG.MOD*
cì-n-è càːkómᴸ néːk＝k
DEM-SG-HR *friend\SG.ABS* *POSS.3S.ABS=SUB*
because that hyena had killed his friend,

The NP **ɗúŋéᴸ cìnè** can be either nominative or ergative according to its morphological shape. The reason to assume that it is ergative in this clause is its position following the verb, where in clear textual examples nominative *A*-NPs were never encountered (see section III.2.2.1).

These rare examples taken from natural discourse are balanced by countless examples from elicitation, using questionnaires with context-free example sentences, where practically every transitive clause yields an ergative-absolutive pattern, illustrated in the following clauses:

Example III.11: ergative case found in elicited sentences

a) **ɗɛ́né wâr ádúréákᴸ.**
ɗɛ́n-é wâr ádúré-ákᴸ
see-3S.DJ *dog\SG.ERG* *cat-PL.ABS*
A dog saw cats.

b) **ɓòkòtú wâr ɗépéᴸ.**
ɓòkòt-í wâr ɗépéᴸ
kill-3S.DJ *dog\SG.ERG* *lion\SG.ABS*
A dog killed a lion.

c) **ɓòkòtùr kùtùrêːk ídîtᴸ.**
ɓòkòt-ìr kùtùr-êːk ídîtᴸ
kill-3P.DJ *hog-PL.ERG* *man\SG.ABS*
Hogs kill a man.

Undoubtedly these examples are unnatural in the sense that it is very difficult to find them in narrative discourse. The factor of *preferred argument structure*, as proposed by Du Bois (1987, 2003), in combination with the tendency of Majang to avoid free pronouns for subjects, explains the very low frequency of ergative-marked noun phrases in natural texts. Preferred argument structure discourages the use of a full NP as an *A* argument. An NP that

is not there cannot be marked for ergative, which renders the ergative case invisible in a language that only ever marks it on an NP.

Still, it would be unwise to discount the information gleaned from such examples on the basis that they do not come from narrative texts. It remains a fact that when a Majang speaker is asked to produce a transitive sentence, without fail s/he first comes up with an ergative-absolutive case pattern in a *VAP* clause. This alignment system therefore represents a deeply ingrained grammatical structure that probably sees prominent use in everyday natural discourse, but not in the kind of structured texts that linguists tend to analyze for writing their grammars. The observer is faced with the notion that *"when a departure from Preferred Argument Structure does occur in natural discourse, the resulting utterance bears not a hint of ungrammaticality"* (Du Bois, 2003, p. 78). After all, *"Preferred Argument Structure cannot be reduced to a grammatical rule. It must remain within the domain of discourse, as a patterning of grammar with consequences for grammar"* (ibid).

Now it still needs to be asked where exactly in natural discourse the ergative-absolutive alignment system thrives to the point that it appears as the grammatical system of choice in almost all elicited transitive clauses; if no one ever uses it in any speech situation at all, this alignment system would be quickly forgotten by the grammar. Looking outside the narrative genre, in my case, did not provide the answer: one text of my corpus is a planning conversation between three speakers with well over 150 clauses, and still the ergative case does not feature in this at all. The same is true for a short hortatory text. It therefore remains a rewarding task for future research[32] to determine the segments or genres of Majang natural discourse that freely admit the use of ergative-absolutive systems. My hypothesis is that they must exist, and that I just have not found them.

As for the alternative to this ergative-absolutive alignment system: as stated above, the main reason why it is almost impossible to see ergative-marked NPs is *preferred argument structure*. But even an existing *A*-NP is usually

[32] Watters (2018, p. 394ff) conducted such research for the Tibeto-Burman language Dzongkha, comparing the impact of genre on competing case-marking patters. For that language, Watters concluded that *"grammatical relations in Dzongkha is found to range from a split-ergative system to a pragmatic system, whereby the manifestation of one marking pattern over another is probabalistically dependent on and functionally motivated by genre."* The exact findings, however, are very different from the situation in Majang, showing a higher probability for ergative-marked *A*s in monologic texts.

not marked by the ergative case. Majang noun phrases can be marked according to two competing case marking systems: one of them is the non-topical ergative-absolutive case marking system, and the other the topical nominative case marking for *A* or *S*. The choice between the two is of a purely discourse-pragmatic nature, based on the topicality of the *A* or *S* in the discourse (see section III.1 for how the concept of topicality is established for Majang). The elicited examples seen above show non-topical instances of *A* (elicited examples usually deal with non-topical participants, as they leave the relevant context open to the interpretation of speaker and hearer), and these are marked by the ergative case. In narrative discourse, new participants are usually introduced in intransitive clauses, or as *PS* or obliques, but practically never as an *A* (Du Bois, 1987, p. 828). From then on, as long as they are activated participants, they are topical and therefore usually marked by the nominative case[33]:

Example III.12: nominative case marking on *A*

a) **má^{L} ɟàrtí^{L} kɔ́nk bòŋú tá:ˈrá^{L} cìgè mógúnkônk.**
má^{L} ɟàrtí^{L} kɔ́nk bòŋ-í
but woman\SG.NOM.MOD REF\RECPST *take-3*S.DJ
tá:r-á^{L} cì-g-è mógún-k-ônk
*meat-*PL.ABS DEM-PL-HR *duiker-*PL-POSS
but that woman took the meat-chunks of the duikers.

b) **nè kán^{L} cà:dí^{L} né:k-ɛ́^{L} wár^{L} cìnè ɓòkòtú dʉ̀ŋéd^{L} né:kíŋ.**
nè kán^{L} cà:dí^{L} né:k-ɛ^{L} wár^{L} cì-n-è
CONJ MEDPST *then* POSS\3S.SG-LOC *dog*\SG.NOM.MOD DEM-SG-HR
ɓòkòt-í dʉ̀ŋéd^{L} né:k=ŋ
*kill-3*S.DJ *hyena*\SG.ABS POSS\3S.SG.ABS=SFT
Then that dog killed Hyena himself.

c) **nè wà:ló:k kòɓú ké é:kê:r.**
nè wà:ló:k kòɓ-í ké é:k-ê:r
CONJ *Waalook*\NOM *think-3*S.DJ QUOT *truth-*PL.ABS
Waalook thought it was serious.

In these three examples, *A* is marked by the nominative case, and preposed to the position preceding the verb. In a) and b), *A* appears in its modified case form (see p. 182), which is always identical between the ergative and

[33] See section IV.1.3.2 for the ways in which the ergative, nominative and absolutive cases are morphologically different from each other.

the nominative case; the nominative case can be identified in a) by the following modifier, which is not ergative-marked, and in both cases by the preverbal position, which is off-limits for ergative constituents. The *P* is invariably presented in the absolutive case.

At first glance a split between ergative-absolutive patterns and nominative-accusative patterns solely based on topicality appears to be outside the typology provided by Dixon (1994, Chapter 4), who allows for splits to be conditioned either by the semantics of the verb, or by the semantics of the NPs involved, or by tense/aspect/mode[34]. The Majang split can clearly not be described in terms of verbal semantics, as all transitive verbs can be accompanied by either an ergative or a nominative *A*. It is also not possible to analyze the split in terms of tense, aspect or mode differences. Regarding the semantics of the NP, Dixon (1994, p. 84ff) presents[35] the *Nominal Hierarchy*, a scale of NPs ranging from 1st person pronouns to inanimate common nouns, as follows:

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">1st person pronouns</td><td rowspan="2">2nd person pronouns</td><td rowspan="2">demonstratives
3rd person pronouns</td><td rowspan="2">proper names</td><td colspan="3">common nouns</td></tr>
<tr><td>human</td><td>animate</td><td>inanimate</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">more likely to be in A than in O function</td></tr>
</table>

Table 6: nominal hierarchy according to Dixon (1994, p. 85)

According to Dixon (1994, p. 85), in a split situation based on this hierarchy, *"an 'ergative' case is used with NPs from the right-hand end, up to some point in the middle of the hierarchy, and an 'accusative' case from that point on, over to the extreme left of the hierarchy."* Although this does not describe the situation in Majang, there still is a connection between this hierarchy and Majang's assignment of cases based on topicality. It could be argued that in a speech-act situation 1st and 2nd person are more topical than 3rd person, that in a narrative a participant referred to by a pronominal element is more topical than one referred to by a common noun[36], and that a human participant is more topical than an inanimate prop. Topicality as a con-

[34] Majang is by no means the only language with split ergativity that cannot be easily described within the parameters presented by Dixon (1994). Gildea (1992, p. 256ff) presents counter-evidence from a number of Cariban languages in South America.

[35] Based on an earlier and very similar hierarchy proposed by Silverstein (1976).

[36] Givón (1984, p. 160) indeed provides such an argumentation for these two points.

cept is therefore hidden in the nominal hierarchy. In another place Dixon (1994, p. 209ff), reviewing the work of Du Bois (1987), does acknowledge the connection between discourse structure and ergativity, and particularly notes how the combination of *S* and *P* is responsible for introducing new (that is, non-topical) information into the discourse, but without making reference to the term topicality, rather using *theme*. He states (1994, p. 212) that this correlation *"provides further explanation for the grammatical identification of S and O*[37]*, at the right-hand end of the Nominal Hierarchy."*

Du Bois (1987, p. 845), discussing Silverstein's nominal hierarchy, proposes that *"the splits involving accusative alignment in personal pronouns, demonstratives, proper names, kin terms etc. are based on their relatively high propensities for a consistently given information status, rather than on a lexical 'agency potential'"*. In a similar way, Givón (1984, pp. 153, 158ff) links split-ergativity to a slightly different implicational hierarchy called *referentiality/topicality scale*, which he breaks up into three sub-scales (p. 159): the *degree of referentiality/topicality* goes from pronouns (high) over definite NPs to indefinite NPs (low). The *degree of individuation* has singulars as high and plurals as low. The *degree of egocentricity* goes from 1st person (high) over 2nd person to 3rd person (low). With the exception of the individuation scale, these factors largely coincide with what is seen as topical in Majang (see section III.1), and they can be used to roughly describe the split between ergative-absolutive and nominative marking. But Givón's initial prediction that *"if a clause is higher on any of the scales […] then it is more likely to receive ergative-absolutive case marking"* (1984, p. 153) goes diametrically against what is observed in Majang, where a high degree of referentiality/topicality of *S* and *A* leads to nominative marking. But Givón then (p. 160) goes on to acknowledge that some Australian languages act the opposite way, with a higher likelihood of nominative-accusative patterns for highly topical NPs. T. Payne (1997, p. 151ff) connects Dixon's nominal hierarchy directly to the concept of *topic-worthiness* and comes to split-predictions almost exactly along the lines as they are found in Majang (p. 144) – this matches an earlier observation by Blake (1987, p. 186) from Australian languages, where there is *"discourse pressure favouring the dropping of ergative marking from those nominals that are most topic-worthy, either because they refer to speech-act participants or entities given at a certain point in discourse"*.

[37] The transitive object *P* in Dixon's terminology.

DeLancey's (1981, p. 653) distinction between *starting-point* and *viewpoint* could also be considered as a cognitive perspective describing the split in Majang. The viewpoint in his model always comes from a topical/referential position, whereas the starting-point in a transitive proposition would usually be the agent. DeLancey states (p. 653): *"Ergative case marking labels the starting-point when it is not also the viewpoint. When viewpoint and starting-point coincide, the NP is not marked for case."* This may well be the situation in Majang; but then one needs to see the nominative case as less marked or even unmarked compared to the ergative case. This is somewhat problematic, as both forms are identical for modified nouns. But at least for unmodified nouns the ergative appears indeed to be more marked by the addition of a low tone or a *HL* tone sequence.

More promisingly, research on Tibeto-Burman languages has shown that discourse-pragmatic factors often play a role in what previously was called "optional" ergative case assignment (Saxena, 1991; Tournadre, 1991; DeLancey, 2011). DeLancey (p. 13f) observes that the

> *"[...] missing piece is the pragmatic force of emphasis or contrast which is associated with ergative marking. Saxena notes that [...] ergative marking [...] cannot be omitted in text examples where the O argument has been marked as a topic by fronting. Tournadre [...] points out that there is no syntactic environment where ergative is truly obligatory, and that wherever it occurs it indicates contrastive focus."*

This, of course, is a different situation from Majang, where the ergative marking is not connected to contrastive focus, but conditioned by the absence or a low degree of topicality. A parallel situation is found in the Australian language Warrwa, for which McGregor (2010, p. 1622ff) interprets the absence of ergative marking to signify that the agent is high in agentivity and *expected* in the context (p. 1622f). He goes on to suggest the features *prominence* or *givenness* to account for the absence or presence of the ergative case in optionally ergative languages, encompassing the semantic concept of agentivity and the pragmatic concept of expectedness. On p. 1625, McGregor prefers to link Blake's concept of topic-worthiness to the feature *backgrounded*, which he envisions to be contextualized as *topicality* in some languages. The situation in Tibeto-Burman and Australian languages therefore firmly establishes pragmatics as a conditioning factor for case-marking systems, and DeLancey (2011, p. 11) evaluates this discourse-pragmatic influence as so pervasive in Tibeto-Burman languages that he thinks it unrea-

listic that all this similarly motivated case-marking variability can be explained by diachronic alignment shifts caused by the innovation of new case markers – an idea proposed, for example, in section 2 of Cristofaro (2012).

Givón's, Blake's, McGregor's, T. Payne's, Du Bois' and DeLancey's work provide a reference frame within which Majang's topicality-based system can be described. The topical/non-topical distinction correlates in many ways with Dixon's nominal hierarchy and with Givón's referentiality/topicality scale, Blake's topic-worthiness, and Du Bois' preferred argument structure. A split system based on topicality as a simplified criterion could therefore easily be conceived. This is further confirmed by the state of affairs in Eastern-Sudanic Päri (Andersen, 1988, p. 294), where the topicalization of *A* results in the loss of ergative marking.

So far only *As* were looked at relating to this split. An *S* can be marked by both the absolutive (if non-topical) and the nominative (if topical).

Example III.13: marking of non-topical and topical *S*

a) **nè mèlkì ɗúmá:t^{L} wà:.**
nè **mèl-kì** **ɗúmá:t^{L}** **wà:**
conj *arrive-CP.3S.CJ* *owner\SG.ABS* *house\SG.DAT*
The owner came home.

b) **nè cá:^{L} ɓá^{L} mèlkíɗ^{L} ɗúmá^{L} wà:...**
nè **cá:^{L}** **ɓá^{L}** **mèl-kí-ɗ^{L}** **ɗúmá^{L}** **wà:**
conj *then* *REMPST* *arrive-CP-RELPST.3S* *owner\SG.NOM* *house\SG.DAT*
After the owner came home…

Both sentences (both from the same narrative in short proximity to each other) are semantically almost identical, except that the first clause is a main clause, and the second a temporal adverbial clause. But there is the pragmatic difference that in a) the *S* is introduced as a new participant to the narrative and therefore not topical, but in b) it is, as the *S* had just been made accessible through clause a). This difference causes the variation in case marking on the NP (visible in the different stem forms of the same lexeme *'owner'*).

Ps at first glance always look the same, regardless of their topicality status, but this identity of case marking is accompanied by a different syntactic behavior. This can be seen from the following set of examples, again gleaned from a single narrative. Both examples show the noun for *'mother'*, but a) in non-topical use, and b) in topical use.

Example III.14: marking of non-topical and topical *PS*

a) **nè kɛ̀ː làŋkì émécᴸ lɛ̀ːrà.**
nè kɛ̀ː làŋ-kì émécᴸ lɛ̀ːr-à
CONJ go\3S find-CP.3S.CJ mother\SG.ABS Leer-DAT
He went to find Leer's mother.

b) **mà ɓòkòtú émécᴸ lɛ̀ːrăːŋ.**
mà ɓòkòt-í émécᴸ lɛ̀ːr-à=ŋ
CONJ kill-3S.DJ mother\SG.ABS Leer-DAT=SFT
But he killed Leer's mother.

In example a), Leer's mother had been mentioned in the preceding context, but is in this clause encountered after a change of place and time, and accordingly is not an expected participant. The thus non-topical *P* therefore triggers the conjoint marking (see section III.3) on the immediately preceding verb (example III.14a). Topical *PS* also come in the absolutive case, but don't meet the condition for conjoint marking on the preceding verb; instead they create the condition that allows the placement of the *SFT*-clitic (see section III.4) on the NP at the end of a sentence (example b). This clause follows clause a) after a short time in the same narrative.

It can therefore be observed that in Majang the discourse-pragmatic factor of topicality accounts for a change of case for *A* and *S*, but it leaves the case of *P* intact. The topicality of *P* is shown by other means.

Because it was shown for other languages that it is rather the discourse-pragmatic factor of focus or focality that prompts the assignment of the ergative case to otherwise unmarked NPs, it needs to be shown here why this analysis has been discarded for Majang in favor of the assignment of the nominative case for topical constituents – the non-elicited NPs with ergative case in examples III.9b) and III.10) could indeed be seen as focal in their pragmatic contexts. Two reasons speak against the idea of ergative marking for focal constituents: first, the ergative-marked NP in example III.9a) plus practically all elicited examples of ergative case provide no contextual evidence that any focality attaches to the NP in question[38]. Indeed, the fact that all elicited transitive clauses have *A* marked by the ergative makes any analysis of the ergative case as the focal case very unlikely – there is no reason to assume that in every elicited transitive clause each *A* defaults to focus marking. It would be more natural to expect focally unmarked *A*s in elicited clauses.

[38] See section VI.1.2 for the context of example III.9a).

Second, the symmetry of the cases in Majang also speaks against the focus theory – one would have to assume that non-focal nominative *A* becomes focal ergative *A*, but that non-focal nominative *S* becomes focal absolutive *S,* taking the same neutral case as the absolutive *P* of either focal or non-focal status. Such a marking of the focal *S* with an inherently unmarked case is not a likely scenario in any case-marking situation. This contrasts with the analysis chosen here, where the same case nominative shows the same discourse-pragmatic status *topic* for both *A* and *S* constituents.

In summary, in Majang *S* and *A* are treated differently according to their topicality. *A* can be nominative or ergative, *S* can be nominative or absolutive. This state of affairs presents a picture that resembles what is called "optional ergativity" in some Tibeto-Burman (DeLancey, 2011) and Australian languages (Schultze-Berndt, 2017, p. 1110). McGregor (2010, p. 1610) defines optional case marking as a *"situation in which in specifiable lexical or grammatical environments, a case marking morpheme (inflectional affix, clitic, or adposition) may be either present or absent from an NP of a specifiable type without affecting the grammatical role borne by that NP."* With the qualification that case marking of *A*, *S* and *P* appears to not be accomplished by morphemes, but by different stem forms (see section IV.1.3.2), this definition almost describes the situation of the Majang variability in *S* and *A* marking. McGregor makes it clear (p. 1611) that optional ergativity is never to be understood as totally free variation, but that it is motivated by semantic or pragmatic factors, which again seems to be the case in Majang with its topicality-based case marking.

There is one difference, however, of Majang to other languages described as displaying optional ergativity, and that is the use of the nominative case in place of the ergative, and its further use as the topical expression of *S*, in place of the absolutive case. In the other optional-ergativity languages the ergative alternates with the absolutive or unmarked case. It is therefore useful to follow McGregor's (2010, p. 1614f) distinction between optional ergative marking and *differential ergative marking* (DEM), where the ergative alternates with another case different from the unmarked or absolutive case.[39]

[39] It is interesting to compare Majang with the situation reported for the Saharan language Dazaga (Walters, 2015, p. 128ff). The *S*, *A* and *P* constituents of Dazaga also receive three different case markings (neutral, ergative, accusative), and the assignment of ergative or neutral case also seems to be governed at least partially by discourse-pragmatic factors, so that Walters calls the whole system one characterized by optional ergativity. But instead of

This DEM is further complicated by what appears to be a fluid-*S*[40] situation, which differentiates between topical (nominative) and non-topical (absolutive) *S* constituents. The distribution of cases does not follow the lexical-semantic categories of agent-like entities or patient-like entities, as one would expect from a split-*S* system. In a prototypical split-*S* language, such as Guarani (Mithun, 1991, p. 524), the agent-like subjects of intransitive clauses (S_A) are aligned with *A*, and the patient-like subjects of intransitive clauses (S_P) with *P*. But in Majang agentivity is not the basis for the variable case assignment in this fluid-*S* situation, but topicality, and therefore the assignment follows the same principle as that of Majang DEM – I therefore prefer to speak of *differential-S marking* instead of a fluid-*S* situation.

T. Payne (1984) observed a similar situation for the three South-American languages Guaymí (Chibchan), Pajonal Campa (Arawakan) and Yagua (Peba-Yaguan). He noticed that in these languages S_P marking was used for the *S* of some verbs of locomotion whenever a distinct change of locational scene was in evidence, or near the climax of a story; he analyzed this special marking as a discourse feature indicating topic-discontinuity – so there is evidence from outside Majang for a discourse-based fluid-*S* situation similar to Majang's differential-*S* marking.[41]

As a summary for the more visual-minded, the following diagram describes the Majang differential case-marking system for *S*, *A* and *P*. These forms are illustrated for the noun **cɔ̀ːlílàŋ**^{L} *'vulture'*, enhanced by an indication of the conjoint-disjoint status of a preceding verb:

Majang's nominative case the third form of Dazaga is the accusative case not present in Majang. Similar situations are further reported by the related languages Kanuri (Bondarev, Jaggar, Löhr, & Tijani, 2011) and Beria (Wolfe & Adam, 2015).

[40] A fluid-*S* system is a special kind of a split-*S* system (Dixon, 2010b, p. 141) that allows the same intransitive predicate to take both markings, depending on the situation. A regular split-*S* system has the marking lexically determined for each intransitive predicate. Since all intransitive predicates of Majang can have their *S* marked with both the nominative and the absolutive case, depending on topicality, Majang would therefore be appropriately labeled as displaying a fluid-*S* system.

[41] I am indebted to Doris Payne for pointing me towards this situation.

Example III.15: the functional range of case forms, based on **cɔ̀:líláŋ^{L}** *'vulture'*

	A	S	P
topical	nominative – *DJ* **cɔ̀:líláŋt^{L}**	nominative – *DJ* **cɔ̀:líláŋt^{L}**	absolutive – *DJ* **cɔ̀:líláŋ^{L}**
non-topical	ergative – *DJ* **cɔ̀:lílâŋt**	absolutive – *CJ* **cɔ̀:líláŋ^{L}**	absolutive – *CJ* **cɔ̀:líláŋ^{L}**

This diagram may lead to the assumption that for a topical *S* or *A* Majang can be classified as a marked-nominative language, or, in the terms of Handschuh (2014, p. 5), as a marked-*S* language. It is, however, necessary to include the qualification "for a topical *S* or *A*" in this statement. The nominative is only used for topical constituents, and in this respect a conditioned case compared to its two non-topical counterparts. The idea of a marked-*S* situation is also problematic for considerations of markedness. In example III.15, the nominative has indeed more segmental material than the absolutive, but it is only tonally distinguished from the ergative. Other nouns, such as **ídĭt^{L}** *'man\ABS'*, **ídì** *'man\ERG'* and **ídĭ^{L}** *'man\NOM'*, show more material for the absolutive than for the ergative and nominative case. It is therefore not possible to call an entire case in Majang more or less marked than another case, at least for the three central constituents of a clause. Section IV.1.3.2 discusses how the cases absolutive, ergative and nominative are not distinguished by identifiable segmental morphemes, but by idiosyncratic tonal and segmental changes in the various stem forms associated with each case. The differences between the cases become transparent when a possessive pronoun (see section IV.3.1.4) is added to the NPs:

Example III.16: case marking differences observed on possessive pronouns

a) **ɓòkòtú dĕpɛ́^{L} nà:kɛ̀ ídĭt^{L}.**
ɓòkòt-í **dĕpɛ́^{L}** **nà:k-ɛ̀** **ídĭt^{L}**
kill-3S.DJ *lion\SG.ERG.MOD* *POSS\1S.SG-ERG* *man\SG.ABS*
My lion kills the man.

b) **ɓòkòtú ídì dĕpɛ́^{L} ná:k.**
ɓòkòtu-í **ídì** **dĕpɛ́^{L}** **ná:k**
kill-3S.DJ *man\SG.ERG* *lion\SG.ABS* *POSS\1S.SG.ABS*
The man kills my lion.

c) **dɛ́:gàr dɛ́pɛ́^{L} ná:k kɛ́kàr.**
dɛ́:gàr **dɛ́pɛ́^{L}** **ná:k** **kɛ́kàr**
sleep\3S.CJ *lion\SG.ABS* *POSS\1S.SG.ABS* *again*
My lion sleeps again.

d) **dɛ́:gár^{L} dɛ́pɛ́^{L} nà:kɛ́^{L} kɛ́kàr.**
dɛ́:gár^{L} **dɛ́pɛ́^{L}** **nà:k-ɛ́^{L}** **kɛ́kàr**
sleep\3S.DJ *lion\SG.NOM.MOD* *POSS\1S.SG-NOM* *again*
My lion sleeps again.

In these examples, the noun form **dɛ́pɛ́^{L}** *'lion'* is the same for all four instances, partly because of idiosyncratic syncretism between the absolutive form and the other forms of this noun, and partly because the modified ergative and modified nominative forms are identical for all nouns (see section IV.1.3.2). But the case forms of the NPs can be unambiguously seen from the three different forms of the accompanying possessive pronouns. Differential-*S* marking results in the near-minimal pair c)-d), where the difference between absolutive *S* and nominative *S* also leads to the difference in conjoint and disjoint marking on the verb. For case marking on possessive pronouns it certainly looks as if the absolutive is less marked than nominative or ergative.

As a final task in this section it remains to point out some errors in my previous publications on the grammatical relations of Majang. In Joswig (2016) I did not appreciate the impact of topicality on the case-marking system, and proposed a split based on modified vs. non-modified NPs. In example 10 of that paper I misanalysed the modified ergative form as a locative form (which is different). Further, I mistakenly assigned the ergative case to a nominative NP in example 8. Such errors may be put into perspective by the fact that the language learner of Majang gets conflicting pictures, depending on whether he studies elicited sentences or natural texts. Having started out with elicited data, I tended to see ergative-absolutive patterns even where they were not in evidence. Unseth, who in his later pronouncements on the language wisely relied on natural texts, was drawn to assume that ergativity was not a feature of the language (König, 2008, p. 190).

III.2.2 Constituent order typology and its impact on case marking

This section presents the basic facts on the order of constituents in Majang (III.2.2.1), and how this affects the analysis of Majang as a language with

differential ergative marking, as some neighboring languages show differing case-marking behaviors in pre-verbal and post-verbal positions. Section III.2.2.2 shows that the state of affairs in Majang is quite different. Sections III.2.2.3 and III.2.2.4 provide other observations about Majang constituent order that do not affect the understanding of case marking, but that readers may want to look for in this section because of important claims made by previous grammars on Majang.

III.2.2.1 Constituent order in main clauses

Dimmendaal (1998a, p. 66) reconstructs Proto-Surmic as probably showing a verb-second order of constituents, which was changed in the Didinga-Murle group to *VAP* via language contact from neighboring *VAP*-type languages such as Toposa, Nyangatom and Turkana. This is contrary to Unseth (1986b, p. 140), who analyzed Proto-Surmic as a verb-initial language. Indeed, in a Majang clause where the constituents *A*, verb and *P* are overtly expressed, they frequently appear in the following order:

Verb – Subject – Object

Examples showing this order can easily be gleaned through elicitation:

Example III.17: basic constituent order *VAP*

a) **ɓòkòtú jàrtíᴸ nàːkè dɛ́pɛ́ᴸ.**
ɓòkòt-í **jàrtíᴸ** **nàːk-è** **dɛ́pɛ́ᴸ**
*kill-3*S.DJ *woman*\SG.ERG.MOD POSS*1*S.SG-ERG *lion*\SG.ABS
My woman kills a lion.

b) **kàwɛ́ wâr àdúré.**
kàw-ɛ́ **wâr** **àdúré**
*bite-3*S.DJ *dog*\SG.ERG *cat*\SG.ABS
A dog bites a cat.

VAP is invariably the order of constituents when eliciting transitive clauses. A Majang grammar entirely based on elicitation is unlikely to encounter any other word order. But when looking at natural texts, it is by no means the most *frequent* display of constituents in Majang. The only main-clause example of *VAP* in my narrative corpus is the following:

Example III.18: basic constituent order *VAP* in a main clause in natural discourse

nè cà:dí^{L} ɓéɲ òmáltè dènɛ́ wà:lô:k gòpàn wéj^{L} lɛ̀:rík.
nè **cà:dí^{L}** **ɓéɲ** **òm-áltè**
CONJ *then* *day\SG.LOC* *one-LOC*
dèn-ɛ́ **wà:lô:k** **gòpàn** **wéj^{L}** **lɛ̀:r-k**
see-3S.DJ *Waalook\ERG* *path\SG.ABS* *house\SG.ABS* *Leer-POSS*
Then, one day, Waalook saw the path to Leer's house.

This clause is the first clause of a new episode in the narrative, with a change of time and place, and the need to re-establish the discourse status of participants. This is also the only main-clause example in my corpus with an ergative lexical NP. Another rare example of *VAP* is the following subordinate clause[42]:

Example III.19: basic constituent order *VAP* in a subordinate clause

àgút^{L} cìnɔ̀ kán^{L} ɓòkòtì:ɗ ɗúŋɛ́^{L} cìnɛ̀ cà:kóm^{L} nɛ́:kík,
àgút^{L} **cìnɔ̀** **kán^{L}** **ɓòkòt-i:ɗ** **ɗúŋɛ́^{L}**
because *MEDPST* *kill\RELPST.3S* *hyena\SG.ERG.MOD*
cì-n-ɛ̀ **cà:kóm^{L}** **nɛ́:k=k**
DEM-SG-HR *friend\SG.ABS* *POSS.3S.ABS=SUB*
because that hyena had killed his friend,

In this example background information is provided in an almost thetical setting. As is shown in section V.9.1, the *A* or *S* is usually not overtly shown in a clause if referring to an already activated participant. *VAP* is in fact a very infrequent constituent structure, mostly used in thetical clauses lacking any information accessible from the preceding context (which is what elicited sentences tend to be). This matches what Du Bois (2003, p. 48) calls *preferred argument structure*, about which he claims that speakers *"freely realize full lexical noun phrases in intransitive subject position or transitive object position, but strongly avoid placing them in transitive subject position"*. This goes together with another aspect of preferred argument structure, that is the constraint that in a transitive clause *"in discourse there regularly appears just one full lexical noun phrase."* (Du Bois, 2003, p. 60). Now in Majang the *A*, if not overtly shown as a full NP, usually also does not appear as a free pronoun (see section IV.3.1.1). As it is only present through subject indexation on the verb, it does not materialize as a discrete constituent of the clause at all. Therefore, in narrative texts, transitive clauses most frequently have a constituent order of *VP*:

[42] See example III.10 for a discussion of the case of the *A* constituent.

Example III.20: constituent order *VP*

a) **nè ɓáᴸ làŋ tàɗápúᴸ.**
CONJ REMPST find\3S.CJ ash_pile\SG.ABS
He found an ash-pile.

b) **nè èːŋáɗîr dǔŋédᴸ à jòwéːɗîːŋ.**
nè èːŋáɗ-îr dǔŋédᴸ à jòwéːɗ-i=ŋ
CONJ smell-CF.3S hyena\SG.ABS CONJ far-3S=SFT
He smelled a hyena far away.

This structure, starting the clause with a verb followed by an absolutive NP, is also encountered in intransitive clauses with an overt *S*, which makes this the default construction of Majang, a syntactic configuration that is a reflection of the language's ergative-absolutive nature:

Verb – NP*ABS*

The following examples show the absolutive NP filling the *S* and the *P* position after the verb:

Example III.21: *V*-NP*(ABS)* default structure

a) **kùcù ɟègúj.**
kùc-ì ɟègúj
come-3S.CJ ox\SG.ABS
An ox comes.

b) **nè ɓáᴸ ìɟàːg òlà káːrínónk.**
nè ɓáᴸ ìɟàːg òlà káːrín-onk
CONJ REMPST make\3S.CJ thing\PL.ABS.MOD fighting-POSS
He made weapons.

In both examples, the *3S* subject is indexed on the verb, which comes in the conjoint form. In sentence a), the following noun phrase is the *S* of the intransitive verb, in the absolutive case. In sentence b), the NP following the verb is the transitive object *P*, again in the absolutive case.

III.2.2.2 Fronting of constituents and its implications for case marking

In natural narrative texts, subjects are overtly shown when a participant needs to be re-established, for example after a change of subject, place or time. In these cases the *A* or *S* usually does not follow the verb, but precedes

it in natural discourse (see section V.3.1.2 for more information on fronted constituents).

Example III.22: preposed re-activated subjects

a) **nè ɓáᴸ ɟàrtíᴸ cìnè bòŋú tá:ˈrá gé:nk, ...**
nè ɓáᴸ ɟàrtíᴸ cì-n-è bòŋ-í tá:r-á
CONJ REMPST woman\SG.NOM.MOD DEM-SG-HR take-3S.DJ meat-PL.ABS.MOD
gé:nk
POSS\3S.PL.ABS
And that woman took his meat, ...

b) **nè ídíᴸ òmá:jᴸ gà:mú gójᴸ òmáltè.**
nè ídíᴸ òm-á:jᴸ gà:m-í gójᴸ òm-áltè
CONJ man\SG.NOM.MOD one-NOM hold-3S.DJ side\SG.LOC one-LOC
One man grabbed one side.

c) **nè ɓòkó:rjánt kàwéŋ.**
nè ɓòkó:rjánt kàw-é=ŋ
CONJ tortoise\SG.NOM bite-3S.DJ=SFT
The tortoise bit it.

In these clauses, the *A* is invariably marked by the nominative case and is just as invariably preposed. Having an alternative *AVP* structure is not unexpected according to Greenberg's prediction that *"all languages with dominant VSO order have SVO as an alternative or as the only alternative basic order"* (Greenberg, 1966, p. 110). But Unseth was not able to confirm this prediction based on elicitation (1989b, p. 109):

> *"Deliberate attempts to elicit other word orders by topicalization did not produce any variants. Some SVO clauses were occasionally elicited at other times, such as in subordinate clauses [...]. My Majang helper consistently rejected the SOV [sic!][43] examples in Bender's article [...]."*

This experience is a strong indication that the *VAP* order of constituents has a firm psychological standing in the mental grammar of Majang speakers. Although the *AVP* order has a high functional load in the syntax of the language for re-establishing accessible participants, it is not something the speakers have a conscious awareness of. Therefore mother-tongue translators will have to be trained in the pragmatic significance of this structure, so that

[43] This is a typo in Unseth (1989). Bender (1983, p. 128f) presents rather unnatural *AVP* examples.

they can apply it appropriately without being unduly guided by the structure of the source language.

Fronting the *A*-constituent to re-activate an accessible participant has striking similarities with what has been observed as word-order alternations in other related Eastern-Sudanic languages. For example, *A*-constituents in South-east-Surmic Suri-Tirmaga (Bryant, 1999, p. 45ff), Western-Nilotic Päri (Andersen, 1988, p. 293f) and Southwest-Surmic Baale (Moges & Dimmendaal, 1998, p. 297) are case-marked when appearing in post-verbal position, but unmarked when in pre-verbal position. These languages have in common that they place the unmarked or absolutive *S* preceding the verb. It would therefore be tempting to describe Majang in similar terms, where the pre-verbal position is the place to show all constituents in unmarked or neutral case, and contrast these forms with the constituents found in the post-verbal position, where the *A*-constituents are case-marked, either with the nominative or ergative case, depending on the other findings in the language. It is probably such a perspective that prompted the previous analysis of Majang as a marked-nominative language (König, 2008, p. 191).

But the data presented so far makes it clear that the situation is quite different from that found in marked-nominative languages such as Suri-Tirmaga or Baale. The case marking of pre-verbal constituents can in no way be characterized as neutral or unmarked, as it is different from the absolutive case of postverbal *P*- or *S*-constituents. The following observations can be made about the pre-verbal position:

- Ergative-marked constituents cannot be fronted.
- The absolutive case cannot be found in pre-verbal position, except when accompanying a co-referential contrastive pronoun (see example IV.219). Absolutive case forms further appear in left-dislocated position (see section V.7.1.2), but these are syntactically different from fronting, as left-dislocated material is placed outside the clause.
- Accordingly, only nominative-marked constituents are found in pre-verbal position.
- No fronting was observed in any natural clause that does not also have some other pre-verbal material – at least a conjunction, frequently a tense marker and sometimes adverbial material. Elicited clauses with a nominative *S* and without an initial conjunction always have the *S* following the verb.

- Elicited transitive clauses with postverbal nominative *A* were rejected by the consultants. The only corpus occurrence is a narrative-text subordinate clause, seen in example V.125.

The nominative case is therefore by no means restricted to the preverbal position – nominative-marked *S*-constituents and subjects of speech clauses are frequently placed after the verb. It is therefore not possible to consider the nominative form a pre-verbal allomorph of the absolutive form, as nominative and absolutive *S* contrast in the postverbal position (as in example III.13).

In summary, it is not possible to transfer the findings in other Eastern-Sudanic marked-nominative languages as a possible explanation for the situation in Majang. The pre-verbal appearances of *S* or *A* are not unmarked for case, and they are not positional variants of the post-verbal absolutive case.

III.2.2.3 Further typological observations relating to word order

Beyond the order of verb, *S*, *A* and *P*, the nuclear clause can also have indirect objects and further complements. These regularly follow the more central constituents.

Example III.23: locative NP following the object

nè rì:ɓé kà:rí kónk dó:k^{L}.

nè	**rì:ɓ-é**	**kà:rí**	**kónk**	**dó:k^{L}**
CONJ	*put-*3S.DJ	*coffee.leaf*\SG.ABS	REF\RECPST	*ground*\SG.LOC

She put the coffee leaves on the ground.

Example III.24: dative NP following the object

é rí:ɓérgé:^{L} kòcíé né:k ádá.

é	**rí:ɓér-gè:ɗ**	**kòcíé**	**né:k**	**ádá**
CONJ	*put.inside-*TF.3S.CJ	*pipe*\SG.ABS	POSS\3S.SG.ABS	*mouth*\SG.DAT

He put her pipe into the mouth.

Therefore the following order of constituents can be established for the nuclear clause:

verb – (S/A) – object (P) – complement

Temporal information is usually not placed into the nuclear complement slot, but into a pre-nuclear slot. Any kind of pre-nuclear temporal information, however, requires the presence of a preceding conjunction. This may be the

reason why almost any clause in a narrative text, even a main clause, begins with some kind of conjunction, usually the connector **nè**.

Example III.25: pre-nuclear temporal material

nè ɓáᴸ càːdíᴸ néːkɛ́ᴸ kòɓú tàwáːwêː kɛ́ ...

nè	**ɓáᴸ**	**càːdíᴸ**	**néːk-ɛᴸ**	**kòɓ-í**	**tàwáːwêː**	**kɛ́**
CONJ	*REMPST*	*then*	*POSS\3S.SG-LOC*	*think\3S.DJ*	*Tawaawee.NOM*	*QUOT*

Right then Tawaawee thought that ...

The locative possessive pronoun preceding the verb here serves as a further temporal adverb, reinforcing the adverb **càːdíᴸ**. As already seen in example III.22, these conjunctions and the temporal adverbs are not the only pre-nuclear information. Preposed subjects are placed between any temporal information and the verb.

III.2.2.4 Question particles and question words

Unseth (1986a, p. 97) pointed out that the Majang language violates Greenberg's (1966, p. 111) 12th universal, which states that *"if a language has dominant word order VSO in declarative sentences, it always puts interrogative words or phrases first in interrogative word questions [...]."*

This universal is indeed violated in Majang, as the interrogative pronouns and question words are always found at the end. See section V.7.3.2 for the use of these interrogative pronouns.

Example III.26: question words at the end of the clause

àríːᴸ kój cáːᴸ òlà cìgì èk?

àr-ɨ̌ːᴸ	**kój**	**cáːᴸ**	**òlà**	**cì-g-ì**	**èk**
do-1P.DJ	*DFUT*	*thereafter*	*things\ABS.MOD*	*DEM-PL-SP*	*how?*

How will we then do these things?

III.3 Conjoint-Disjoint Distinction

The Majang verb makes use of a conjoint-disjoint distinction that is conditioned by the case and the topicality status of the following NP. In the simple clause of example III.27, a non-topical *S* follows the verb:

Example III.27: verb followed by non-topical *S* in a simple clause

mèlkì dúmá:t^{L}.
mèl-k-ì **dúmá:t^{L}**
arrive-CP-3S.CJ *owner\SG.ABS*
The owner arrived.

This example shows a non-topical *S* marked by the absolutive case. If that same constituent were topical, it would instead be marked by the nominative case:

Example III.28: verb followed by topical *S* in a simple clause

mèlkí dùmá: kónkúŋ.
mèl-k-í **dùmá:** **kónk=ŋ**
arrive-CP-3S.DJ *owner\SG.NOM.MOD* *REF\RECPST=SFT*
The owner arrived.

In both preceding examples, the suffixes **-ì** or **-í** are the subject markers on the verb, indexing the *S*. They show a tonal difference, which is caused by a grammatical distinction that plays a major role in the Majang language. When a verb phrase is directly followed by an absolutive NP (as in example III.27), then it can take the *conjoint* (*CJ*) form of the verb, manifested by the *3S* suffix **-ì**. If any other word follows the verb phrase, or nothing follows it, then the *disjoint* (*DJ*) form is used[44], as illustrated by the suffix **-í** in example III.28. This means that all instances of nominative, ergative, locative and dative case are preceded by disjoint verb forms. Disjoint forms are also used preceding topical *P* constituents in the absolutive case. The conjoint form cannot be used with a clause-final verb. Whereas the disjoint forms of verbal indexing suffixes can have all kinds of tonal markings, the conjoint suffixes always have a fixed low tone (see section IV.2.3 for how conjoint forms differ from disjoint forms in the various verbal paradigms). A significantly longer pause following a disjoint verb in a non-final context (as in example III.28) is not in evidence.

[44] I am deeply indebted to Gerrit Dimmendaal, who pointed me to this phenomenon usually found in some Bantu languages. He (Dimmendaal, to appear) reports a similar conjoint-disjoint distinction for the Southwest-Surmic Baale language, and sees traces of it in Southeast-Surmic Mursi.

The terminology of conjoint and disjoint is taken from Bantu linguistics[45], where similar distinctions[46] are found in a number of Eastern Bantu languages. Creissels (2012, p. 1) describes this distinction as follows:

> *"[...] a conjoint verb form is a verb form that cannot be found in sentence final position, and cannot be separated from the following phrase by a pause. A disjoint verb form is a form that does not have this limitation, but is not excluded from non-final contexts either, and a disjoint verb form in non-final position is not necessarily separated from the following word by a perceptible pause."*

This description defines conjoint and disjoint in entirely structural terms, and, as it stands, describes the behavior of the conjoint and disjoint forms in Majang quite accurately, which is why this terminology is adopted here for a Nilo-Saharan language. As far as I know, the terms conjoint and disjoint were not applied previously for languages displaying ergative-absolutive structures – this makes it necessary to use caution while applying the terms in the Majang context with its very different syntactic and pragmatic environment compared to Bantu languages.

When it comes to the function of conjoint and disjoint forms, there are at least some Bantu languages where the definition of conjoint and disjoint remains on the structural level (Van der Wal, 2011, p. 1735). But even for those, van der Wal asserts that *"there are pragmatic effects attached to the choice for the one or the other verb form, where the element following the conjoint form is non-topical and may be focal [...]"* (ibid.).

Van der Wal's (2017, p. 15) most recent definition of the conjoint-disjoint distinction is even more explicit in the inclusion of information structure as a defining criterion:

> *"The conjoint/disjoint alternation is an alternation between verb forms that are formally distinguishable, that are associ-*

[45] Besides the Surmic languages indicated by Dimmendaal, conjoint-disjoint distinctions outside the Bantu family were also reported for Adamawan Doyayo (Elders, 2006) and the Gur language Yom (Fiedler, 2017).

[46] The situation in Majang does not fit the defining characteristics of metatony, as summarized by Hyman (2017, p. 108). Metatony in Bantu happens whenever the verb in question is followed by an object. But this is not the case in Majang, where the presence of an object in itself is not sufficient to trigger the tonal difference.

> *ated with an information-structural difference in the interpretation of verb and/or following element and of which one form is not allowed in sentence-final position."*

Riedel (2009, p. 31) observes that in those languages which have this distinction, *"a disjoint verb cannot precede certain focal items, such as wh-words."* Even if this holds true for Bantu languages, such a claim cannot be made for Majang. The conjoint form is not consistently observed in all places where the verb is followed by a constituent in focus. The following example shows the disjoint form preceding an interrogative pronoun:

Example III.29: disjoint forms preceding focussed NP

ɟàrtí ná:k, dâm kɔ́ ɟìkónt?				
ɟàrtí	**ná:k**	**dâm**	**kɔ́**	**ɟìkónt**
woman\SG.ABS	POSS*1*S.SG.ABS	*eat**3*S.DJ	RECPST.DJ	*what*.ERG
My woman, what ate her?				

Furthermore, example V.93c) shows a disjoint form preceding a constituent which apparently is in a new-information focus position, as the response to a content question[47]. If the conjoint form cannot be reliably encountered in front of constituents with new-information focus, then focus is apparently not what the conjoint form signals.[48]

My previous publication on the conjoint-disjoint distinction (Joswig, 2015) asserted that the distinction was based purely on syntactic parameters (p. 175). But this was written before I fully understood the importance of topicality in Majang. Assuming topicality as the starting point of the conjoint-disjoint distinction in Majang, as envisioned by Van der Wal (2011, p. 1735), would render the language much more similar to the state of affairs in Tswana, as described by Creissels (2012, p. 18), which also has a super-

[47] For a discussion of wh-questions as diagnostics for new-information focus, and some caveats, see Van der Wal (2016, p. 264ff).

[48] Van der Wal (p.c.) points toward a possibility how conjoint and focus may still be indirectly related in Majang; the assumption would be that verb phrases are marked as conjoint when the adjoining NP is counted as being inside the VP constituent – this would only ever happen to absolutive NPs, but only when they refer to unexpected or new, that is, focal entities. Question words in Majang are apparently outside their linear order in the clause (see section III.2.2.4), and therefore also outside the VP constituency, which would explain the disjoint marking preceding focal material. The same would have to be assumed for disjoint marking preceding NPs denoting responses to questions, such as in example V.93c).

ficially syntactic conjoint-disjoint distinction; it is diachronically traceable to the presence or absence of a topical NP.

Topicality, as defined in section III.1, serves other purposes in Majang beyond deciding the conjoint-disjoint marking, as it also is the basis of DEM and differential-*S* marking. It turns out that disjoint marking before absolutive *P* constituents always coincides with the placement of the *SFT*-clitic (see section III.4), if all other structural conditions for its placement are met.

Therefore, the following is a summary of what the conjoint-disjoint distinction accomplishes in Majang:

- Only absolutive NPs can trigger conjoint marking on a preceding verb. Therefore, the conjoint-disjoint distinction is neutralized for all verbs not followed by an absolutive NP.
- The conjoint form on the verb shows that the following absolutive NP is not topical.
- If an absolutive NP follows a disjoint verb form, it implies that the NP refers to the *P* constituent of a transitive clause, and that this referent is topical.
- For *S*-constituents, the conjoint-disjoint distinction serves as a redundancy device indicating the topicality status alongside the differential-*S* marking described in section III.2.1.2. This is helpful in situations where the case forms are identical through syncretism (see example III.30).

Whether in a previous stage of the language the conjoint form was used preceding all non-topical constituents cannot be decided due to lack of published data from any other related language. Currently one can only go by today's situation in Majang, which firmly places the conjoint form in front of non-topical absolutive NPs, and the disjoint form in all other contexts.

So far the conjoint-disjoint distinction was only observed in languages which do not make use of case marking. The syntactic status of an NP in Bantu languages can be captured by the more general terms subject, object, and adjunct, which are the terms used in the descriptions of Bantu conjoint-disjoint distinctions (Creissels, 2012, p. 18 f; Van der Wal, 2011, p. 1738). In Majang, instead, the syntactic properties of a noun phrase are closely related to its case marking, and therefore the language must make reference to a

particular case (the absolutive) in order to assign the correct marking to each verb.

It was stated above that conjoint status is a feature of the verb phrase, not just of the verb. This is because in situations where the verb is followed by a tense marker, such as **kɔ̀**, **kɔ̀ː** and **ɓà**, it is not the verb that is marked for conjoint, but the tense marker. The verb appears therefore in the (apparently unmarked) disjoint form, although the whole VP is conjoint (section IV.3.4.2).

The conjoint-disjoint distinction is quite useful for the syntactic interpretation of language data. The nature of the Majang case system does not allow for an easy identification of case forms for each noun, as the differences between nominative, absolutive and ergative are usually expressed only tonally or through idiosyncratic stem changes, if indeed they are expressed at all. The conjoint-disjoint distinction therefore frequently allows a clear identification between some homophonous case forms, as in the following examples:

Example III.30: case disambiguation through conjoint and disjoint verb forms

a) **dɛ́ːgàr** **wárᴸ** **kɛ́kàr.**
sleep\3S.CJ *dog\SG.ABS* *again*
A dog sleeps again.

b) **dɛ́ːgár** **wár** **gòdèj.**
sleep\3S.DJ *dog\SG.NOM* *house\LOC*
The dog sleeps at the house.

Both examples have the same verb *'he sleeps'* as the intransitive predicate. Example a) has it immediately followed by the *S* in the absolutive case. Example b) has the same *S*-NP following the same verb. Although on the surface the two subject NPs in both clauses sound identical (the lack of downstep on the nominative form cannot be heard in this context with a following low tone), the difference of the conjoint-disjoint marking on the verb makes it clear that in example a) **wárᴸ** is in the absolutive case, whereas in example b) **wár** is not. It is therefore marked by the nominative case, which becomes only clear through the redundancy effect of conjoint marking.

III.4 The Sentence-Final Topicality Marker (SFT)

Another device of the Majang language related to topicality is the *sentence-final topicality marker* (*SFT*).

This device consists of a velar nasal **=ŋ**, added as an enclitic to the last constituent of a main clause, if this constituent is either a verb phrase or a topical NP. This main clause needs to be the last element of its sentence; a main clause that is not the final clause of its complex sentence is not marked.

The following set of examples shows the use of the *SFT*-marker at the end of the verb phrase:

Example III.31: *SFT*-marker following verb phrases

a) **kè: ɓàrtéŋ.**
kè: **ɓàrt-é=ŋ**
then *give.birth-3S.DJ=SFT*
Then she gave birth.

b) **pá:kkì: kô:ŋ.**
pá:k-kǐ:^{L} **kó:^{L}=ŋ**
hot-CP.1P.DJ *NFUT=SFT*
We will soon be hot.

c) **nè ŋà:r nè:kè ɗé:gârŋ.**
nè **ŋà:r** **nè:kè** **ɗé:gâr=ŋ**
CONJ *go\3S.DJ* *then* *sleep\3S.DJ=SFT*
He went and then slept.

These examples are full sentences in Majang. They have in common that no element is following the verb phrase. This requires the use of the *SFT*-clitic. In example b) this marker is attached to the tense marker, which is here the final element of the VP (see section V.2 for a discussion of the need to establish the VP as a relevant syntactic unit of Majang). The *S* of each final clause is topical and therefore does not have to be overtly present to be identifiable. This is always the case with 1st and 2nd person subjects (as in example b), and it happens with some 3rd person subjects, as in example a) and c). The *SFT*-marker, if attached to a sentence-final verb phrase, therefore shows that the topical but unexpressed *S* (except by indexation) is the only topical constituent in the final clause.

But not only verb phrases are marked by the *SFT*-clitic. It is also used on sentence-final NPs when these are seen as topical.

Example III.32: *SFT*-marker following topical sentence-final noun phrases

a) **nè ŋù:ldî: béá^{L} nè:kê:ŋ.**
nè ŋù:l-dî: béá^{L} nè:k-é=ŋ
CONJ break-AC.3S spear\SG.NOM.MOD POSS\3S.SG-NOM=SFT
His spear broke.

b) **nè cà:dí^{L} né:kɛ́^{L} èpáj cè:níŋ.**
nè cà:dí^{L} né:k-ɛ^{L} èpáj cè:n=ŋ
CONJ then POSS\3S.SG-LOC chase\3S.DJ 3S=SFT
Then, at that time, he chased him.

c) **má^{L} ɓòkòtú émɛ́c^{L} lè:rǎ:ŋ.**
má^{L} ɓòkòt-í émɛ́c^{L} lè:r-à=ŋ
but kill\3S.DJ mother\3S.ABS Leer-DAT=SFT
But he killed Leer's mother.

Example a) has a nominative NP at the end of the clause, whereas examples b) and c) have a topical *P*-NP, which in the case of c) is modified by a dative NP that serves as the special possessive form of kinship nouns (Unseth, 1992b, p. 99). In all three cases, the NP following the verb is topical, as established through the pragmatic context of the narratives from which these examples were picked (see section III.1 for a discussion of the pragmatic factors determining what is topical in Majang).

Not only absolutive and nominative NPs can be followed by the *SFT*-clitic. It can also be seen on locative or dative NPs, when their referents are interpreted as topical in the discourse:

Example III.33: *SFT*-marker following topical locative or dative noun phrases

a) **dé^{L}ná kán^{L} ké:c mìlkìácě:ŋ.**
dén-á kán^{L} ké:c mìlkìác-è=ŋ
see-1S-DJ MEDPST priest Milkias-LOC=SFT
I saw (it) with Rev. Milkias.

b) **gèlè:wèr ɓɔ̀ ré tínâŋ.**
gèlè:w-ɛr ɓɔ̀ ré tín-a^{L}=ŋ
listen-3P.DJ also 3P.PRAG 1P-DAT-SFT
They also listen to us.

These last two examples provide the clearest evidence that the *SFT*-clitic is indeed a topicality marker. In example a) the locative NP refers to a well-known figure among the discourse participants. In example b) the dative NP refers to the speech-act participants themselves. At least the first example can be used without the *SFT*-marker, then indicating that the clause-final NP is not topical (if Rev. Milkias is an unexpected entity to the discourse participants in this context).

Regardless of the case of the NP marked by the *SFT*-clitic, the clitic only makes a statement about the topical status of that NP. Other NPs preceding that NP can be topical or non-topical, and their status would instead be shown by DEM, differential-*S* marking, the conjoint-disjoint distinction, or not at all.

This *SFT*-clitic was subjected to various interpretations in the literature on Majang, as it puzzled all researchers, including the present author, leading to various insufficient analyses. Bender (1983, p. 132) just noted its optional presence and then wisely refrained from any further analysis of the clitic. Unseth (1989b, p. 111), with much better data, attempted an analysis of **=ŋ** as an intransitivity marker, but he himself listed a number of problems with this proposal. Examples III.32b) and c) clearly show that **=ŋ** may be applied to the *P* of transitive clauses. Unseth further had to call the marker optional, as he had to concede data where the *SFT*-marker is left out in intransitive clauses – these are clauses in which the intransitive verb is followed by non-topical *S*-NPs or adverbial phrases:

Example III.34: lack of *SFT*-markers in intransitive clauses

a) **kùcù ɟègúj.**
kùc-ì **ɟègúj**
come-3S.CJ *ox\SG.ABS*
An ox comes.

b) **nè kɛ̀ː dʊ̂kà cê.**
nè **kɛ̀ː** **dʊ̂k-a^{L}** **cê**
CONJ *go\3S.DJ* *forest-SG.DAT* *DEM.DAT*
She went to the forest.

Getachew (2014) glossed the morpheme throughout his thesis as a perfective marker, without providing evidence that may have lead him to this analysis. But it is no problem to attach the clitic to clearly imperfective propositions:

Example III.35: *SFT*-marker in imperfective clauses

a) **dàkín kɔ́ːᴸ táᴸ à ìndîːŋ.**
dàk-ín kɔ́ːᴸ táᴸ à ìndí=ŋ
remain-2S.DJ NFUT 1S.DAT CONJ mother\1S.NOM=SFT
You will remain my mother.

b) **wéːwéːríːkàríŋ.**
wéːwéːr-íː-k-ár=ŋ
swing\IPFV-AP-EXT-2P.DJ=SFT
You$_{PL}$ *swing back and forth.*

In Joswig (2015) I devoted a whole section of my paper to show that **=ŋ** is used to mark that a verb is accompanied by nothing but argument indexation, with no participants coded by overt NPs. My analysis assumed that the marker only appears on verb phrases, never on noun phrases, and therefore I wrongly doubted some data provided by Unseth (1989b), who suggested that the marker is also used on NPs. As examples III.32 and III.33 reveal, the current analysis now agrees with Unseth that the marker is used on both verb phrases and noun phrases.

It may be tempting to call the *SFT*-marker a clause- or phrase-final marker, as has happened for the closely related Suri-Tirmaga language (Bryant, 1999, p. 95); but this would mask that its occurrence is conditioned by the pragmatic environment of the clause, in conjunction with a few syntactic factors. The placement of the *SFT*-marker is governed by the following rules:

1. The *SFT*-marker is used on main-clause verb phrases if they are not followed by any other material before the end of the clause.
2. The *SFT*-marker is used on topical main-clause NPs if they are not followed by any other material before the end of the clause.
3. The *SFT*-marker is only used at the end of a sentence.

The first two rules were already illustrated above. One more set of examples is needed to illustrate that any other material following the verb phrase or the topical NP prevents the use of the *SFT*-clitic. The adverb **kékàr** *'again'* is such material, as can be seen in the following examples. The *SFT*-marker cannot be placed anywhere in these sentences:

Example III.36: no use of *SFT*-marker following other material

a) **nè kúcíːᴸ tàɟíːᴸ kɛ́kàr.**
nè kúc-iːᴸ tàɟ-ǐːᴸ kɛ́kàr
CONJ come-1P.DJ investigate-1P.DJ again
We will begin to investigate again.

b) **nè ŋàːrkí dʊ́ŋɛ́ᴸ kɛ́kàr.**
nè ŋàːr-kí dʊ́ŋɛ́ᴸ kɛ́kàr
CONJ go-CP.3S.DJ hyena\SG.NOM again
Hyena came again.

The third rule requires more explanation. The substance of the rule is, of course, implied in the name of the sentence-final topicality marker. It means that the *SFT*-marker is not used at the end of a non-final clause:

Example III.37: no *SFT*-marker in a non-final clause

máᴸ wárᴸ kɔ́nk ŋàːrkí, nè dâm à óbîːŋ.
máᴸ wárᴸ kɔ́nk ŋàːr-kí nè dâm à óbîː=ŋ
but dog\SG.NOM REF\RECPST go-CP.3S.DJ CONJ eat\3S.DJ CONJ big\3S.DJ=SFT
But Dog went over and ate a lot.

If the *SFT*-marker were to be used not only at the end of each sentence, but at the end of each clause that complies with conditions 1 and 2, then one would expect it in this sentence to show up following **ŋàːrkí**. But it is not used, which establishes its role as a *sentence*-final topicality marker. This knowledge helps with parsing strings of main clauses, which in narratives are all introduced by the ubiquitous conjunction **nè**. Speaker intuition quite often lumped clauses together into one orthographic sentence which according to the use of the *SFT*-marker apparently need to be broken up into two sentences:

Example III.38: the *SFT*-marker as a sentence recognition device

máᴸ cɛ́nkᴸ wárᴸ[49] **èːŋàdâːŋ. nè èːŋádîr dʊ̀ŋɛ́dᴸ à jɔ̀wɛ́ːdîːŋ.**
máᴸ cɛ́nkᴸ wárᴸ èːŋàdáːː=ŋ nè èːŋád-îr
but 3S.CONTR dog\SG.ABS sniff\3S.DJ=SFT CONJ smell-CF.3S
dʊ̀ŋɛ́dᴸ à jɔ̀wɛ́ːdíː=ŋ
hyena\SG.ABS CONJ far\3S.DJ=SFT
But dog sniffed. He smelled Hyena far away.

[49] This form could also be the nominative **wár**, as the floating *L* cannot be phonetically established preceding a word beginning with a low tone. But in this syntactic context, accompanying a co-referential contrastive pronoun, only absolutive nouns are encountered.

These two main clauses were originally seen by the informants as being parts of the same sentence. The use of the *SFT*-marker following the first verb, however, does not allow such an interpretation – that text segment needs to be analyzed as containing two syntactically independent sentences.[50]

Two additional problems remain with the interpretation of **=ŋ** as a sentence-final topicality marker. First, there are a few instances like the following example where the *SFT*-marker is used and where absolutely no topical participant appears to be involved in the clause. These examples contain impersonal weather or environmental verbs.

Example III.39: further problems with the *SFT*-marker

nè kɔ́ɟúrú¹rúŋ ɔ̀kɔ́ cìnìk			
nè	**kɔ́ɟúrúr-í=ŋ**	**ɔ̀kɔ́**	**cì-n-ì-k.**
CONJ	*become.dark-3S.DJ=SFT*	*like*	*DEM-SG-SP-POSS*
It became dark, just like this.			

This sentence, at first glance, may fit better with the analysis of **=ŋ** as a marker for argument indexation only, as proposed in Joswig (2015) – there I assumed a completely syntactic rule governing its appearance on verb phrases, whenever no other constituents were present in the sentence. This analysis made no reference to pragmatic factors, but also had to wrongly ignore all occurrences of **=ŋ** on noun phrases. An alternative interpretation, in line with the idea of **=ŋ** as a topicality marker, is that weather and environmental verbs indeed refer to topical entities, that is the weather and the general environment – the interaction of these with the narrative can be taken for granted and is grounded in the world-view of the speech-act participants.[51]

Second – and this can be illustrated with the same example III.39 – this sentence has material following the verb marked by the *SFT*-marker. Majang narratives frequently use such expressions which seem to express the attitude of the narrator (see examples IV.267 and V.138b), and which are usually translated as *'just like this'*. It might be possible to analyze them as extra-clausal and even extra-sentence material which is thrown in by the narrator after the sentence as such is finished, but before the next sentence begins.

[50] See example V.126 for an apparent exception to the rule that the *SFT*-clitic closes every sentence.

[51] See Givón (1990, pp. 904, example 9a) for a similar topical understanding of weather phenomena.