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Journal

Himalayan Linguistics, 22(1)

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/H922153801

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Core case marking and related phenomena in South Central Tibeto-Burman (Kuki-Chin)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines our current understanding of the distribution and characteristics of core case marking and related phenomena in South Central Tibeto-Burman (Kuki-Chin) languages. Markers of case and their functions are surveyed according to subgroup, and an assessment of their diachrony is formulated. The paper also considers two analytical challenges—potential tonal marking of grammatical information in case-marking systems, and the presence of other elements which may be confused with case marking.

KEYWORDS

Kuki-Chin, South Central, Tibeto-Burman, Trans-Himalayan, case marking, ergative, agentive, differential marking, optional ergativity, tonal morphology

This is a contribution from *Himalayan Linguistics*, Vol. 22(1): 130–164.

ISSN 1544-7502

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*Core case marking and related phenomena in South Central Tibeto-Burman (Kuki-Chin)**

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1 Introduction

In this paper, I provide an overview of case marking for core participants in the South Central Tibeto-Burman (Kuki-Chin) languages that we know about; I also discuss some analytical challenges often associated with these case-marking systems. In Section 2, I survey the formal markers for S, A, and P (in the sense of Payne 1997), and what we know about their distribution and alignment according to recognized subgroups of South Central (henceforth, SC); it will be clear that while there are some systems which might easily be viewed as exhibiting ergative/absolutive alignment, for most SC languages this is less than clear, reflecting the nature of alignment in Tibeto-Burman perhaps more generally (see especially Chelliah 2017 in this regard).¹ This overview is summed up with an assessment of the possible diachrony of the case markers discussed in the section. In Section 3 I turn to two further issues which may bear crucially on an analysis of case-marking systems in SC: the formal cohesion between case markers and case-bearing entities, including the potential for tonal expression of case; and the presence of other elements which have a similar distribution to case marking, which, however, are not case markers, but instead, deictic elements or markers of information status. I conclude with an assessment of what we do and do not know, and make recommendations on the types of data which will allow us to make progress in this important domain of SC grammar.

Before turning to the main topics of the paper, a few preliminary observations are in order. These relate to *non*-core participant marking in the languages. As we will see, these non-core markers have drifted into the domain of core case marking for a significant number of languages. This sort of

NSF grant #BCS-0349021 has supported my work with Khumi and Mru, and grant #BCS-1360770 has supported work with Rengmitca. Grants #BCS-1911269 to Dartmouth College and #BCS-1911385 to CSU, Fullerton (Kenneth Van Bik, P.I.) have funded work with Lawmtuk-Ruawghawn. Thank you to Shobhana Chelliah, Kenny Baclawski, Ken Van Bik, Muhammad Zakaria, and an anonymous reviewer for useful comments and suggestions.

¹ It would of course be desirable also to consider the behavior of P, T, and R participants in ditransitive events (in the sense of Haspelmath 2005), but this relationship has generally not been treated as explicitly for SC languages as that of S, A, and P has. Overall, while verbal participant marking alignment tends to treat the R of a ditransitive event on a par with the P of a monotransitive event, SC languages appear to prefer oblique marking of Rs, either with a locative or other oblique case-marking element, although symmetrical treatment of R and P is also attested. This facet of core case marking warrants systematic attention in future work.

drift is well established as a tendency in the development of core case-marking systems in Tibeto-Burman (LaPolla 2004; Coupe 2011).

First, there are two widespread oblique markers in SC, $*=a(?)$ and $=in (<*ij)$. In most languages, only the $*=a(?)$ marker is used for locatives, and the $*=ij$ marker is reserved for other obliques, especially instruments (although reflexes of $*=ij$ may mark other obliques in addition to instruments, such as ablative in Hakha Lai or inessive and comitative in Hyow).² Languages may have other means for expressing these relations. For instance, Maraic languages typically make use of unrelated markers for locative, and Northeastern languages characteristically have an instrumental marker distinct from the usual reflexes of $*ij$.

Additional oblique markers typically exist (e.g., for comitative, standard of comparison, terminative, etc.), although these do not have the widespread distribution that the other markers have, and they show considerably more variability from language to language than the reflexes of $*=a'$ and $*=ij$ do. Spatial relations are also typically expressed via oblique marking of what have variably been termed relational nouns, relator nouns, locational nouns, or positionals in the typological literature (i.e., elements which have a nominal behavior and associated meanings, such as 'top', 'area underneath', and so forth.) We will not focus on such elements here.

With regard to genitives, nominal and independent pronominal possessors would appear to be frequently unmarked, though they often involve a distinctive tone (e.g., in Mizo, Tedim, Khumi). Alternatively, possessors may bear a marker of roughly the form $=V$ (e.g., $=\text{'e}$ in Khumi, $=a$ in Mizo and Daai); there is also a kV -shaped genitive marker in some Southeastern Chin languages (e.g., in Hyow and some varieties of Asho). Genitive marking also will not be a focus in what follows.

2 The distribution and alignment of core case marking

This section explores the distribution of different formal case markers and case-marking patterns according to SC subgroups. The discussion here is organized approximately along the lines of the subgrouping proposed in Peterson (2017), as outlined in the introduction to this volume.

Before turning to the systems in question, it should be acknowledged that there is an extensive literature on the alignment of Tibeto-Burman case-marking systems, including, among others, LaPolla (1992, 1995, 2004); Coupe (2011); DeLancey (2011); Coupe and Lestrade (2017); and Chelliah (2017), as well as two volumes of *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* devoted to careful studies of systems for individual languages, edited by Chelliah and Hyslop (2011b, 2012).

While there has been a long-standing conception that case-marking systems in Tibeto-Burman often have a general ergative/absolute appearance, there has been a clear and growing consensus in recent years that apparent ergative marking might be better regarded as agentive marking, differential (agent/subject) marking, or in some instances, even viewed as some form of information status marking rather than as strict case marking.³ Besides disambiguation of the A and P in a context where there are two equally likely As, a long-acknowledged motivation for agentive marking (LaPolla 1995), Coupe and Lestrade (2017) also mention the following: clarification of a

² For the sake of simplicity, from this point on I will sometimes represent glottal stops in this paper with an apostrophe. Apostrophes also will be used to represent vowels of minor syllables in sesquisyllabic structures.

³ As Chelliah (2017) points out, some Tibeto-Burman languages actually do conform to a canonical ergative/absolute alignment, not just in terms of nominal marking patterns, but also in the behavior of syntactic pivots.

core participant's semantic role under zero-anaphora of another core participant, a specific subtype of disambiguation; coding of contrastive status or foregrounding of (an agent) participant; expression of volitionality or extraordinary/unexpected behavior on the part of an agent; as well as some less-commonly attested motivations.⁴

It will be evident that instances of clear ergative/absolutive alignment in SC languages' nominal case-marking systems are relatively rare. Often the justification of such classifications for nominal markers has been minimal and based on translational elicitation methods rather than on naturalistic data. Especially in light of the variability that we see elsewhere in this part of Tibeto-Burman, we should strive harder for more complete descriptions of case-marking patterns, even for what are otherwise regarded as well-described languages.

2.1 Central

2.1.1 Core Central

With these caveats in mind, Core Central SC languages have what are usually described as fairly typical and rigid ergative/absolutive case-marking systems. In this context the term *absolutive* refers to a nominal which bears no case marking. S is unmarked (=absolutive), as seen in (1a) and (2a) for Mizo and Laizo, respectively. Ps likewise are unmarked (=absolutive) in (1b) and (2b). For these languages, the *ergative* marker is =*in*, underlined in (1b) and (2b).⁵ There are no noted person or tense-based splits for these languages, and so far most of the factors mentioned in the immediately preceding paragraphs do not appear to be relevant.

(1) Mizo (Chhangte 1993: 60):

- a. intransitive
kán-huan-a? *keel* *â-lùut*
 1S.PL-garden-LOC goat 3S-enter
 'A/the goat entered our garden.'
- b. transitive
keel-in *hnim* *â-pet*
 goat-ERG grass 3S-graze
 'A/the goat is eating/grazing grass.'

(2) Laizo (Zahao variety):

- a. intransitive
 ... 'a-ru' *pakhat cú* 'a-dáng *súung='a'* 'a-lùut-pâng...
 3S.POSS-bone one DEIC 3S.POSS-throat inside=LOC 3S-enter-accidentally
 '...one of its bones accidentally got into her throat...' (Osburne 1973: 145-146)

⁴ These include explicit marking of a causer argument and marking of a habitually acting referent. To these, Chelliah (2017) adds considerations of (spatio-)temporal reference, with the observation that in some languages, agentive marking tends to correlate with past or perfective events as opposed to present ones.

⁵ For Laizo, see also King (2010).

- b. transitive
khí mîpâ='îñ vatê 'a-kâp
 DEIC man=ERG bird 3S-shoot
 'That man shoots the bird.' (Osburne 1973: 117)

While there may be tonal differences between them, this marker bears a clear resemblance to the oblique marker, *=*ij*, discussed in the introductory section. In Core Central languages there is a tendency for **ij* to develop into *n* after *i*, so it is reasonable to assume that this element is related to the =*ij*~=*in* elements we see elsewhere.

In Lai and Bawm, there is a different ergative marker, =*ni*'. Furthermore, at least in Lai, there is a use of the verbal ablaut system (=stem alternation—see Bedell et al (2023)) which allows for zero-marking of A participants; such unmarked A participants pattern syntactically as S participants.⁶ (3) shows the differential treatment of S (unmarked in 3a) vs. marked A and unmarked P (in 3b), vs. the alternative unmarked treatment of A (in 3c).

- (3) Lai:
- a. intransitive
paalaw (khaa) a-thii
 name DEIC 3SS-die_B
 'Paalaw died.'
- b. transitive
paalaw='ni' ka-zaal (khaa) a-Ø-ba'
 name=ERG 1S.POSS-bag DEIC 3SA-3SO-hang_D
 'Paalaw hung up my bag.'
- c. transitive with alternative ablaut form
paalaw (khaa) ka-zaal a-Ø-bat
 name DEIC 1S.POSS-bag 3SA-3SO-hang_B
 'Paalaw hangs up/hung up my bag.'

Although further work may ultimately reveal such factors, the use of sentences like (3b) vs. (3c) so far does not appear to have any clear relation to the various factors mentioned in the introduction to this section dictating the use or non-use of an agentive marker.

Bawm has the system apparently most similar to Lai's, although the alternation in main clauses that we see in Lai is not explicitly noted by the existing description. (4a) and (4b) are analogous to Lai (3a) and (3b) in terms of what they illustrate for Bawm.

⁶ Bedell et al. (2023) term this the *non-agentive* vs. the *agentive* construction type, which only some languages exhibit. While somewhat orthogonal to the issue of core case marking, we should note that the non-agentive construction in Lai is, interestingly, functionally similar to an antipassive in terms of allowing an A to access various constructions (relativization, control of anaphora in a subsequent clause under coreference, etc.) It differs from a canonical antipassive in that it does *not* overtly involve a non-core treatment of the P participant, however.

(4) Bawm:

a. intransitive
mipâ chu a-hawng-kal
 man DEIC 3SS-DIR-go
 ‘The man comes.’ (Reichle 1981: 36)

b. transitive
chialchiang=nih buh chu a-sawk
 Chialchiang=ERG rice DEIC 3SS-ladle.out
 ‘Chialchiang ladles out the rice.’ (Reichle 1981: 27)

I will not go into all of the details here, but there are reasons to suspect that the ergative marker seen in Lai and Bawm is of relatively recent origin compared to the markers found elsewhere in Core Central. First, Lai has reflexes of the *=*ij* marker both as a generalized oblique marker, =*in*, and in case agreement seen in postnominal deictic elements. For instance, *kha-n*, which appears to include the =*in* marker, occurs with all non-absolutive (i.e., ergative or obliquely marked) participants; *khaa* occurs with absolutes (see Baclawski (2023) for further discussion). Second, there is ample evidence for a copular element of the form *=*ni* in SC, as well as residual copular semantics obtaining for the =*ni* ergative marker in Lai (see Bickel 2000). These observations, along with general considerations of information structure, lead to the hypothesis that the current Lai/Bawm ergative construction arose from a cleft construction involving a copula (from whence the =*ni* ergative marker derives) marking a focused A participant in transitive sentences.⁷

While its status as Core Central is open for debate (its participant marking suggests it perhaps is a better fit with Maraic, as discussed by Peterson and Van Bik 2020), Lawmtuk-Ruawghawn⁸ also has a somewhat divergent ergative marker, as seen in 5:

(5) Lawmtuk-Ruawghawn:

m'khan gom-puy=ning gon-hno aca
 then bear-AUG=ERG come-MAL/ALL.APP EVID
 ‘Then bear came at him, they say.’ (BR71)⁹

One thought is that this perhaps results from a combination of two ergative markers: a reflex of *=*ij* attached to a marker with an =*nV* form. We do not need to look far before we encounter markers of exactly the latter form.

⁷ An additional piece of evidence for this account is a homophonous =*ni* element found in Lai as a focus marker in the independent pronominal paradigm (Lehman and Van Bik 1997).

⁸ This language has been known by various other names, such as Thet, and Lamtuk Thet (VanBik 2009); we base our current designation on the language’s names for the two villages where it is spoken in slightly different but unquestionably mutually-intelligible dialects.

⁹ Citations for Lawmtuk-Ruawghawn, Khumi, and Rengmitca data are all record locators in corpora for these languages.

2.1.2 Maraic

While the arguably ergative/absolutive alignment pattern found with nominal case marking in Core Central holds also for Maraic languages, here we see evidence for two different markers.

Documentation for Mara is not entirely clear on the issues, presumably reflecting dialectal differences in the described varieties. Early descriptions note a marker *-na*, which occurs not only with A participants (6b), but also with S participants (6a).¹⁰ Objective case in the language “has no inflection” (Lorrain 1951: 11).

(6) Mara nominative marker:

a. intransitive

tho-na *a-pao*
tree-NOM 3S-fall

‘The tree falls.’ (Lorrain 1951: 10)

b. transitive

chapaw-na *laisa* *a-tu*
man-NOM maid 3S-hit

‘The man hit the maid.’ (Lorrain 1951: 9)

The *-na* marker cited by Savidge (1908) and Lorrain (1951) for Mara resembles the *=nah* ergative marker Watson (2019) identifies for Senthang.¹¹

(7) Senthang:

<i>...aa-no=le</i>	<i>po=le=nah</i>	<i>khui</i>	<i>sung</i>
3PL.POSS-mother=CONJ	father=CONJ=ERG	village	inside

<i>tangvaw=viatei</i>	<i>aa=va-au=thw=hai</i>	<i>ei...</i>
unmarried.man=all	3PL.SUBJ=DIR-call=all=PL	and

‘...their parents called together all the young men in the village and...’ (Watson 2019: 47)

This *=na* ergative marking seen in Maraic languages is comparable to *=nA* ergative marking found in other parts of SC, and possibly to markers seen further afield in Northeast India (see sections 2.2, 2.3, 2.5, and 2.6 below).

Alongside a *=na* marker for transitive subjects, the earlier source for Mara, Savidge (1908), identifies a “nominative case” marker *=ta*, seen in (8):

(8) Mara:

<i>chanao=ta</i>	<i>sachha</i>	<i>a-zua</i>
man=ERG	rice	3S-sell

‘The man is selling rice’ (Savidge 1908: 4)

¹⁰ It is worth noting that Savidge, even earlier, clearly notes that this marker occurs “When the subject of a sentence is followed by a transitive verb in the active voice” (1908: 4), so its occurrence in examples like (6a) is surprising.

¹¹ In what follows, I will refer to markers similar to this one as *=nA* markers. Generally they have a low back vowel of one or another quality, or, in some cases, a more centralized vowel.

Savidge’s discussion unfortunately does not entirely clarify the distribution of one versus the other of these markers; he also implies that these markers are sometimes absent.

More recently, Arden (2010) also identifies a marker *-ta* for A participants in Mara. Arden does not include any examples of this marker with any NP participants in the A role; her examples appear to mostly be elicited and the *-ta* marker is only seen with reportedly optional independent pronominals. According to her account, this marker also occurs optionally with S participants; for S participants Arden does provide examples with full NPs, such as (9).

- (9) Mara:
pavaw ta a amô
 bird NOM.PART 3SG.SUBJ.PW sleep
 ‘The bird sleeps’ (Arden 210: 110)

As a final note on Mara, Lorrain (1951) does include an element *ta* ‘by means of, with’ in his dictionary, which is perhaps related to this *-ta* marker. Clearly, it would be desirable to see what the distribution of these elements is in naturalistic data.

Recent work with a third Maraic language, Zophei, has identified a *=ta* ergative/instrumental marker, which resembles what has been reported for Mara. (10) provides a typical example from a rendition of the Pear Story collected by the author’s fall 2020 field methods course:

- (10) Zophei:
maa noihee pa-thung=tah kee (uh) noiheepoo khaa boong-hai=kaa
 DEM child CL-three=ERG DEM child-male DEM help-3P=ANT

pear khaa toong tshuong=lai=tah kee aa-tshia-pui
 pear DEM basket inside=LOC=FOC DEM 3P-put-COM.APP
 ‘Those three kids helped the boy and helped him put the pears inside the basket.’

Note that in Zophei this marker also has an additional function as a marker of focus, also demonstrated in this example.

A final Maraic language, which we have little systematically analyzed data for, Zotung, also may have a *=tV* ergative marker, albeit with a front rather than a back vowel: *te454*.¹² Aside from marking A participants, which there is admittedly only meager evidence for, *te454* appears to mark instruments in other contexts (Shintani 2015).

The *=tV* marking we see in Maraic, most of which involves a low back vowel, is reminiscent of *=tɔ* marking that is a hallmark of instrumentals/comitatives in the Northeastern languages, to which we turn in the next section. Examples (11a) and (15b) below include instances of this marking in Tedim and Sizang, respectively.

To briefly summarize what we see for the Central group, these languages provide the clearest instances of canonical ergative/absolutive case marking in SC. However, there are lingering doubts

¹² Shintani (2015) indicates Zotung’s tonal distinctions by unsuperscripted sequences of numerals following a syllable.

for several of the languages, where multiple markers have been reported, as well as subtle hints that for some languages what appears to be an ergative case marker may actually be a marker of focus rather than a strict ergative marker.

2.2 Northeastern (formerly Northern)

In Northeastern languages, as in many of the Core Central, languages, *=in* typically marks A participants. Also as in Core Central, there are no standard sorts of case-marking splits reported here. Examples (11) and (12) show the basic distribution for Tedim and Sizang. Note the absence of marking for S in the (a) sentences and for P in the (b) sentences. On the other hand, the As of (11b) and (12b) are marked by *=in*.¹³

(11) Tedim:

a. intransitive

da'pa: *a-xuaŋ=tɔ'* *in=a'* *a-cia'='a:...*
 name 3S.POSS-drum=COM house=LOC 3S-return=AND
 'Dapaa returned home with his drum, and...' (Henderson 1965: 128)

b. transitive

da'pa:='in *zoŋ* *gɛ:m-gɛ:m=in* *do:ipa:* *a-bɔ'='a:...*
 name=ERG also creep-creep=manner spirit 3S-seize=AND
 'Creeping up slowly, Dapaa seized the spirit, and...' (Henderson 1965: 126-7)

(12) Sizang:

a. intransitive

ŋu:l *kual-the:i-ve*
 snake coil-POT-sometimes
 'Sometimes a snake can coil up.' (Stern 1963: 259)

b. transitive

ŋu:al='in *ka-siel* *hoŋ-tha:-sak-hi:*
 man=ERG 1S.POSS-mithan DIR-kill-MAL-CONCL
 'The man has killed my mithan.' (Stern 1963: 257)

There are further possibilities in Sizang, which we will return to shortly.

Haokip (2009) cites an *=in* ergative marker for several other Northeastern languages: Vaiphei, Gangte, Paite, Simte, Zou, and Thadou. Thadou's ergative marker has some interesting allomorphy discussed by Haokip (2007: 122-123). Besides an allomorph *-n*, which occurs after vowel-final bases, there is a *-lin* allomorph following *l*-final bases, and after nasal or oral stop-final bases, a nasal-initial allomorph (*-nin* or *-min*) occurs, depending on the place of articulation of the preceding consonant.

¹³ Otsuka (2014) notes that *=in* also marks instruments in Tedim, although it bears a distinct tone from the ergative marker (20). (11a) contains the aforementioned *=iV* (here *=tɔ'*) element in a comitative sense. ((15b) below also shows a related element in Sizang, however with instrumental sense.)

We will look at the comparable phenomenon in Paite in section 3.1 below to illustrate a separate point.

For Thadou, Krishan also cites a =*na* agentive marker which appears under certain grammatical conditions, although the reliability of this source is unclear. See the example in (13).

(13) Thadou instrumental marker:

xut=na *kə-ne-dij* *ə-hi*
hand=INST 1S-eat-FUT 3S-be
'I will eat by hand.' (Krishan 1980: 44)

Older records for Thadou indicate some variability or a split in the distribution of the ergative marker. See (14c), where a 2s participant presumably does not require the ergative marking when it is acting on a 3s inanimate participant. Alternatively, it may be that at this stage the marking was used only for purposes of A/P disambiguation, and in this particular case it is unnecessary because the situation does not require disambiguation due to various factors, both in light of the discourse context and pragmatic considerations, and in terms of the verbal participant marking.¹⁴

(14) Thadou:

a. intransitive

waachaa *abooleen* *a-leng-tai*
bird all 3-fly-PAST
'The birds have all flown away.' (Hodson 1906: 45)

b. transitive with *-in*

taisipi-n *mengchaa* *tui* *sung=aa* *a-shoon-hluut-tai*
old.woman-ERG cat water inside=LOC 3-press-put-PAST
'The old woman has dipped the cat in the water.' (Hodson 1906: 12)

c. transitive without *-in*

nang ibi til na-hol-ha-m
2S what thing 2-look-CONCL-INTERR
'What are you looking for?' (Hodson 1906: 45)

Other older records for Northeastern languages record comparable patterns, so variability in the occurrence of ergative marking seems to have been in place by the end of the nineteenth century.

¹⁴ For (14c), Kenny Baclawski also suggests that the nature of the question would involve a non-focal 2s participant, which might allow the omission of the *-in* marker. The interaction between case marking and interrogative formation, especially as it references focus structure, is an area we will not attempt to cover here as we have few details for most languages. However, given dependencies between the stem alternation and question formation (see Bedell et al. 2023), on the one hand, and dependencies between stem alternation and case-marking patterns (e.g., the agentive vs. the non-agentive pattern seen in Hakha Lai), on the other, we should expect there to be interactions between case-marking patterns and question formation.

A further marker appears in Sizang (Siyin), which, alongside material presumably related to the =*in* element (see examples in 15), also has an element *-na* marking A participants (examples in 16):

(15) Sizang, A marked by *-in*:

a. *wí sáháng=in pé'-hi*
 dog tiger=ERG devour-CONCL
 'The tiger ate the dog.' (Rundall 1891: 60)

b. *amá laam tuaan-ná a-pai lai=á mihín khatpapó=in*
 3S road walk-NMLZR 3-go middle=LOC person someone=ERG
tháu=to' káp-tá-hí
 rifle=INST shoot-PAST-CONCL
 'While he was walking along the path, someone shot him.' (Rundall 1891: 38)

(16) Sizang, A marked by *-na*:

a. *zó-té=ná a-suón a-thí ching a-lú mé' mó*
 Chin-PL=ERG 3.POSS-relation 3-die time 3.POSS-head shave INTERROG
 'Do the Chins shave their heads when any of their relations die?' (Rundall 1891: 45-6)

b. *kómá mihín ngá ngál-te=ná thau=to' hong-káp=á*
 1P man five enemy-COLL=ERG rifle=INST DIR-shoot=LOC
hong-that-hi
 DIR-kill-CONCL
 'The enemy shot five of our men.' (Rundall 1891: 11)

As we saw for Thadou, older records for Sizang suggest that A marking was not obligatory, or may have been subject to some sort of conditioning. See the examples in (17).

(17) Sizang, A unmarked:

a. *ngútá khat kémá biel ngú-sa'-hi*
 thief one 1S cooking.pot steal-MAL-CONCL
 'A thief stole my cooking pots.' (Rundall 1891: 55)

b. *kómá ín tiang kasal-té kómá=tu' thing tom-té-hi*
 1P house dwell slave-COLL 1P=BEN wood cut-HAB-CONCL
tui twai-té-hi
 water draw-HAB-CONCL
 'Our slaves cut wood for us and draw water.' (Rundall 1891: 47)

Note the similarity in context between these examples in Sizang and the absence of =*in* for the earlier attestation of Thadou: this is a context where A/P disambiguation is unnecessary, so it is unsurprising that A marking is absent here.

More than thirty years following Rundall’s description, Naylor (1925) notes a case ending *ina* “for the nominative”, which is said to be frequently omitted (3). Stern (1963) acknowledges Naylor’s observations, but claims the marker was not used by his consultant (274). The most recent treatment of Sizang, Davis (2017), recognizes both independent =*in* and =*nǎ*: ergative markers, in addition to treating *si:á* as an explicit marker of absolutive. Davis claims that =*nǎ*: is used regularly in colloquial speech. It also clearly occurs in some of the text material he uses. Moreover, he cites a number of instances where both markers cooccur marking a single NP, as in (18):

- (18) Sizang:
- | | | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------|------------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| <i>sáha:ŋ</i> | <i>kʰát=in=nǎ:</i> | <i>á=měi</i> | <i>tô:</i> | <i>lǎm</i> | <i>la:k</i> | <i>a:</i> |
| tiger | one=ERG=ERG | 3.POSS=tail | with | road | show.I | NF |
-
- | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------|------------|--------------|------------------|
| <i>sáha:ŋ=in=nǎ:</i> | <i>lǎm-pí:</i> | <i>tôn</i> | <i>kʰua:</i> | <i>tôn=puí:</i> |
| tiger=ERG=ERG | road-AUG | enroute | village | accompany.II=COM |
- ‘A tiger showed the way with his tail and accompanied [him] to the village.’
(Davis 2017: 44)

This seemingly double marking is noteworthy in light of the marking we saw in Lawmtuk-Ruawghan and marking we will see for Tarao, a Northwestern language, in section 2.5.¹⁵

To sum up, while Northeastern languages have a superficial ergative/absolutive marking pattern, there are a number of questions. Older sources show considerable variability in the occurrence of the hypothetical ergative marker, and some languages exhibit more than one potential ergative marker, both begging the question of the relationship between these markers and information status.

2.3 Southeastern (formerly part of Southern)

Southeastern languages fall into three groups: languages, like K’cho and Daai relatively far to the north and close to the Central languages; languages under the rubric of Asho, far to the south (including four distinct varieties which we have records for from the turn of the last century, as well as recent work by Otsuka); and languages like Hyow and Sumtu, which appear to be fairly similar to Asho varieties, with the notable exception of their case marking. Despite clear grammatical differences, these languages are lexically quite cohesive, and would appear to be more closely related to each other than to the other groups.

¹⁵ Kenny Baclawski points out that the phenomenon of double marking on the face of it contraindicates an analysis of both of these markers as ergative markers, and that (at least) one of them must therefore be doing something else, such as marking information status (in particular, some species of focus.) Alternatively, an anonymous reviewer suggests the pattern may involve the phenomenon of case compounding (Noonan 2008; Coupe 2011). Since both elements involved can also be used independently, it would not appear to be a usual instance of case compounding, however, where two independently attested elements of a case paradigm together end up marking a distinct case form.

2.3.1 K'cho and Daai

In K'cho and Daai, an ergative construction is well documented, and its use appears to be consistent in transitive clauses, without exhibiting any splits. See the examples in (19) and (20).

(19) K'cho (Mang 2006: 16):

- a. intransitive
vok shì(k)-ci
 pig die.I-NF
 'The pig died.'
- b. transitive
ui noh vok htu-ci
 dog ERG pig bite.I-NF
 'The dog bit the pig.'

(20) Daai (So-Hartmann 2009: 162):

- a. intransitive
*nukpüi: sun(*noh) kyap=kti*
 old.woman DEM(*ERG) cry=NON.FUT
 'The old woman cried.' [intransitive]
- b. transitive
thang sun=noh pasong ah hnim
 Thang DEM=ERG important.man S.AGR:3S killed=NON.FUT
 'Thang killed an important man.'

Clearly these markers are similar in appearance and function to the =nA elements discussed above in Maraic and Northeastern languages.

2.3.2 A sho

In other Southeastern languages, there are somewhat different-looking markers, which have an apparently defective, and often not altogether ergative distribution. There are two significant problems with these sources. First, it is not really possible to figure out exactly where the languages described in them were spoken (the sources all refer to extended overlapping ranges in the far southeastern Chin-speaking area). Besides this, it is somewhat difficult to evaluate the vowel quality of the ergative suffixes: although the authors are explicit in providing comparative qualities either in English or other European languages, for the vowel quality of the items in question, it is difficult ascertain precisely what qualities are intended.

In Freyer's (1875) discussion of Sandoway (modern Thandwe) Khyeng, there is no nominative/ergative case noted, but a =nə element occurs regularly after agents of speech verbs, as in

(21a).¹⁶ It is almost exclusively with such verbs that any data with NP subjects is available; S and A participants are typically expressed via verbal indexation. (21b) is a possible exception where the verb involved is not a verb of speaking.

(21) Sandoway Khyeng:

a. *pəmblaung=nə, kie kə-kói nauk-u nauk-u*
 name=ERG 1S 1S-beautiful say-DECL say-DECL
 ‘Pawmblaung says, “I’m beautiful.” (Freyer 1875: 58)

b. *ənü=nə əpo=nə nə-so yok hmu=agú...*
 mother=ERG father=ERG 3P.POSS-child corpse see=SEQ
 ‘The parents, looking on the dead body of their young one, ...’ (Freyer 1875: 56-57)

Houghton (1892) describes what we might refer to as *Southern Chin A*, spoken close to Sandoway. This variety of Southern Chin has what is described as “nominative” case =*nü*, which might be an ergative marker, but which has distributional anomalies: as Houghton comments, “This affix is frequently omitted in ordinary conversation” (15). (22) provides some examples where an A participant is marked by this element.

(22) Southern Chin A, A with “nominative” marker:

a. *a-sen-á moi-gü ashö-hyaw=nü kyakaik nan-á-gü’*
 3-near-LOC exist-GEN Chin-COLL=NOM name village-LOC-GEN

patho” natho” pün-‘si” hen-mawn-dina sit-ü
 man woman CL-seven capture-catch-? go-DECL
 ‘The Chins of a neighbouring village have committed a raid on the Kyakaik village and taken away seven men and women as captives.’ (Houghton 1892: 44)

b. *kyé=nü ayá ka-‘mü-yü yan ‘ngo” moi-ni-ü”*
 1s=NOM 3S 1S-see-DECL night five exist-PAST-DECL
 ‘Five days have elapsed since I saw him.’ (Houghton 1892: 50)

However, as seen in (23), A can also be left unmarked. Note that, again, this is an instance where the A and P roles would be clear, regardless.

(23) Southern Chin A, A without “nominative” marker:

tó a‘ngo” kyé wómló pyak-‘mak-ü, ak’ó a-bek-aidi”
 DEIC cooly 1S luggage destroy-?-DECL wages P-give-PROHIB
 ‘That cooly has spoilt my things, don’t pay him his wages.’ (Houghton 1892: 50)

¹⁶ Chelliah and Hyslop (2011) note this pattern as a widespread tendency; I would suggest that it is likely derivative of the tendency for agents of speech verbs in a given narrative context to require (re-)foregrounding when they speak, as opposed to some other participant in the narrative.

There are also numerous instances where an S appears to be marked by =*nü*. Some examples are provided in (24).

(24) Southern Chin A, S *with* “nominative” marker:

- a. *ayá=nü* *ló-laih*
 3S=NOM come-OBLIG
 ‘He must come.’ (Houghton 1892: 28)
- b. *nán-‘só-hyaw=nü* *sü”-éy-ü*
 village-child-COLL=NOM gather-MID-DECL
 ‘The villagers assemble.’ (Houghton 1892: 29)

Joorman (1906) covers what we might term *Southern Chin B*. Here we see the element =*nie* described as ‘nominative’; there is a variant =*nö* used with verbs of speaking, although according to Joorman, “The distinction of these case endings is not generally observed” (1906: 9). (25) gives some instances where A has marking, including a case where =*nö* occurs with a non-speech verb.

(25) Southern Chin B, A *with* “nominative” marker:

- a. *hpo=nie* *saung hkanau* *a-hbun-hnie-yö*
 3S=NOM rice much 3S-obtain-PAST-DECL
 ‘He has gotten much rice.’ (Joorman 1906: 21)
- b. *naung=nie* *ahbaung* *na-lü-ye-mö*
 2S=NOM what 2S-want-MID-INTERR
 ‘What do you want’ (Joorman 1906: 24)
- c. *hsamo=nö* *a-hau-hö*
 master=NOM 3S-say-ASP
 ‘The master said.’ (Joorman 1906: 24)
- d. *nie* *hsamieso=nö* *alun* *a-e-ma-hnie-yö*
 DEIC child=NOM all 3S-eat-?-PAST-DECL
 ‘This child ate everything.’ (Joorman 1906: 33)

Example (26) presents an instance where A is unmarked.

(26) Southern Chin B, A *without* ‘nominative’ marker:

- aya-me* *hkanau* *ma-e-yö*
 3-PL much 3P-eat-DECL
 ‘They eat much.’ (Joorman 1906: 40)

And (27) gives a number of examples where S apparently takes this case marker.

(27) Southern Chin B, S *with* “nominative” marker:

- a. *manlan=nie* *a-kaw-hö*
 commissioner=NOM 3-feverish-ASP
 ‘The commissioner has a fever.’ (Joorman 1906: 9)
- b. *hpo=nie* *lo-pomomo-hai*
 3S=NOM arrive-AGAIN?-FUT
 ‘He will arrive once more.’ (Joorman 1906: 37)
- c. *hpo=nie* *hdue-wau-hnie-yö*
 3S=NOM die-ALAS-PAST-DECL
 ‘Alas, he died.’ (Joorman 1906: 38)
- d. *hpo hdü-di* *hkho=ha* *ame=nie* *mlü=ya* *ma-awng-hä-yö*
 3S die-REL time=LOC 1P=NOM city=LOC 1P-stay-ASP-DECL
 ‘At the time that he died we were living in the city.’ (Joorman 1906: 53)

Recent work by Otsuka (2018) confirms the presence of a =*nəʔ* marker in Asho, which presumably is closely related to these varieties. See (28).

(28) Asho:

- a. *yàʔmè=nəʔ* *păshéN=ŋà* (*mă=*)*tɔN=ŋəʔ*
 3PL=ERG PR=OBJ PL=follow=REAL
 ‘They followed Pasen.’ (cf. *tɔN* ‘to follow’) (Otsuka 2018: 11)
- b. *yàʔ=nəʔ* *cè=há* (*mă-*)*dáIN=ŋəʔ*
 3SG=ERG 1SG=OBJ >1/2-hit=REAL
 ‘He hit me.’ (cf. *dáIN* ‘to hit’) (Otsuka 2018: 10)

Interestingly, Otsuka also notes the first instance we will see of P marking alongside Asho’s ergative marking, also present in (28). Otsuka (2015: 127) describes this explicitly as ‘primary object’ marking. P marking in this variety of Asho exhibits fairly complex allomorphy: the basic form appears to be =*há*, but it has an *ŋ*-initial variant following nasalized vowels and an initial *k* following bases ending in glottal stop. Despite this variability in form, it is probable that this P marking reflects the locative marker which was discussed in Section 1.¹⁷ Locative marking would appear to be a reasonable source for P marking, not only from a general grammaticalization perspective, but also from a SC-internal perspective, as we will see when we turn to core participant marking in Southwestern languages in section 2.4.

So, to sum up so far on Southeastern, corresponding to what in Daai and K’cho are confidently described as =*nA* ergative markers, in languages of the Asho type, there was a marker of

¹⁷ In fact, there is some evidence that this locative marker may have had an initial consonant, ranging from initial glottal stop, which it has in Hakha Lai, and more subtle clues, such as velarization of a preceding consonant that is sometimes detected with it in Khumi, or gemination of a base-final consonant preceding it, as in Paite (Singh 2006: 87).

the form =*nV*, often with a non-front vowel corresponding to the so far most widespread South-Central ergative marker type. However, in these languages the marker did not have a clearly ergative distribution. It is unclear whether there were any information status nuances associated with it.

2.3.3 Hyow/Sumtu

As noted already, in terms of lexicon and morphology, Hyow and Sumtu appear to be highly similar to the Aso varieties discussed in the previous section (especially that of Fryer 1875). However, they differ substantially in terms of their case marking.

Although under translational elicitation conditions with limited recourse to text materials I initially found a more complex distribution for Hyow's ergative marker extending into first and second persons (Peterson 2003), Zakaria's recent (2018) comprehensive study of the language using primarily naturalistic data has not detected these complexities, so I will assume that his simpler conclusion is correct and use examples from his study here. Hyow has a marker, =*la*, which occurs with As and shows a person-based ergative split: it only marks third persons. Typically verbal participant marking is all that occurs when an A is first or second person, so there are virtually no instances where a first or second person pronoun could be marked by =*la* in natural discourse anyway. (29a) shows a typical usage of =*la* with an A participant, while (29b) demonstrates its absence for an S participant.

(29) Hyow:

a. *phôl=lâ* *â-tsång=tś?* *dâ?l=tî* *hmútótśó*
 snake=ERG 3SG.POSS-waist=DLIM swallow.II=R.EVID girl
 'The snake swallowed the girl up to the waist.' (Zakaria 2018: 541)

b. *ání* *tsét-hnś?=tî*
 3SG go-ULT=R.EVID
 'He finally went.' (Zakaria 2018: 499)

There is similarly no case marking of Ps in Hyow, as seen in (29a), but perhaps more clearly through comparison of (29a) with (30).

(30) Hyow:

hślshómś?=lâ *phôl* *i-ní-tśm*
 snake.charmer=ERG snake 3A-PL-chase.II
 'The snake charmers chased a snake.' (Zakaria 2018: 342)

Sumtu has an evidently related marker -*lr?*, which Watkins (2013) dubs a subject marker, although all of the available data suggests that it occurs with A, as in (31a), and not with S, as seen in (31b).

(31) Sumtu:

- a. $n\backslash$ -pɔ/-lɿʔ/ wa\ ʔ/-weiʔ\ -beʔ/¹⁸
 2-father-SBJ net 3-throw-yet
 ‘Your father is still casting [his] net’ (Watkins 2013: 105)
- b. $bək\backslash$ /lɛw/-sɔ/-haʔ/ ʔ-n/-khew/-hni\
 [k.o.bird]-child-PL 3-PL-hatch-PRF
 ‘The bekbalew chicks hatched’ (Watkins 2013: 121)

As in Hyow, there does not appear to be any case marking associated with Ps in Sumtu.

It is worth noting the similarity in form between these =lA markers and the topic markers found in Southwestern languages, which we now turn to.

2.4 Southwestern (formerly part of Southern)

Southwestern languages distinguish themselves from the parts of SC discussed so far in that they exhibit essentially nominative/accusative case marking. The marking of P participants may furthermore be of a differential nature, such that not all Ps are marked.

Case marking in Khumi (discussed further in section 3.2—see also Peterson (2011, 2019) for more detailed discussion) involves essentially the following: zero-marking for S/A and =a^l for highly individuated P/R participants. However, two other high-frequency markers, =mō³ ‘foregrounder’ and =lō^l ‘topic’, obscure the analysis, as discussed later. The sentences in (32) illustrate the basic system.

(32) Khumi:

- a. $t\längm^3$ $k'lay^l = a^l$ $khây^5 = mō^3$ ke^2 -pray^l = lō^l
 suddenly monkey=LOC bee=FGR bite-INTENS=TOP
 ‘Suddenly the bees bit the monkeys relentlessly...’ (18.122)
- b. $nayb^l$ $düing^2$ -mab^l $t'kay^5$ $töng^4 = bo^3$
 then be.evening-ANT tiger arrive=REAL
 ‘Then, after it became evening, the tigers arrived.’ (15.63)

Crucially, as will be shown below, =mō³ is not an ergative marker, but rather, an indicator of information status.

According to So-Hartmann (2010), Lemi also has an essentially nominative/accusative case-marking system, with some flexibility in terms of A marking. She analyzes a marker =ma, which is a clear relative of the ‘foregrounder’ in Khumi, as the marker of agents, but not other types of As, such as experiencers; ultimately she expresses uncertainty that it actually should be regarded as a case marker because it can be absent, be replaced by the topic marker, or may have specific pragmatic nuances associated with its use. Intransitive subjects in Lemi are unmarked. On the other hand, Ps (but not Rs) take possible marking by =bung, for which, so far, no related elements are evident in other languages. The examples in (33a) and (33b) show A and P marking in Lemi. (33c) includes an

¹⁸ / and \ are used to indicate high vs. low tone on the immediately preceding syllables in Watkins’ examples.

example of an S, which is, however, marked by Lemi's topic marker, =lä⁵; unfortunately there do not appear to be any examples of intransitive subjects which do not bear the topic marker in the data available for Lemi.

(33) Lemi:

- a. *vai.düing laifaw=ma kai=tea älo kaw=te vi=dy*
 this.evening gibbon=AGT 1S=DAT word smart=NZR EMPH=CL.FIN
 'This evening the gibbon lied to me.' (So-Hartmann 2010: 2)
- b. *ä.päai(=ma) ä.capaw=bung daithung manga=a ly hai pä*
 POSS.father(=AGT) POSS.son=OBJ jungle direction=LOC go CAUS PRT

vi=dy
 EMPH=CL.FIN
 'The father caused his son to go to the jungle.' (So-Hartmann 2010: 3)
- c. *ä.ni³=ni³=lä⁵ ly¹ hawi⁵ mei³ vi⁵*
 3PS=DUAL=TOP go DUAL both EMPH
 'They went both of them.' (So-Hartmann 2014: 14)

On the other hand, what So-Hartmann (2009) identifies as a subject marker in Mro-Khimi, *la*, resembles the topic marker seen in all other Southwestern languages to date. The P marker *gan* is also less clearly related to the other P markers seen here, and is distinct from Mro-Khimi's locative marker. See example (34).

(34) Mro-Khimi:

- Mong Mong la a-je gan braan de*
 (name) SUBJ 3S-elder.brother OBJ fight CL.FIN
 'Mong Mong fights with his elder brother.' (So-Hartmann 2008: 2)

Finally, in Rengmitca, as elsewhere, there is a =lö~=*la* topic marker, but no clear correlate of the foregrounder seen in Khumi, and possibly in Lemi. In Rengmitca, there is yet another P marker, in this case homophonous with the locative marker in the language, seen in (35).

(35) Rengmitca:

- dök⁴lö³ matnit²=nö³=pä³ pan³ kläng⁴=nö³ khaj¹-wet⁴-dök⁴=nö*
 then 3d=LOC=FOC raft TOP=LOC put-PFV-REAL=SEQ

m'-jaw⁴-sut²-dök⁴=ti³
 CAUS-float-DUR-REAL=EVID
 'Then they put them on a raft and floated them (off).' (109.54-55)

As mentioned, the (debatable) case-marker =*ma* in Lemi is clearly related to the non-case-marker =*mö* in Khumi, and the =*la* marker of Mro-Khimi is clearly related to the topic markers of approximately the same form in the other Southwestern languages. On the other hand, there seems

to be no P marker which the languages have in common. The Southwestern P markers would all appear to be independent innovations. The languages are in fairly significant contact with non-SC languages (including the non-SC Mru-Khongso group of languages—see Peterson and Wright (2009)—and either Arakanese, including Marma in Bangladesh, or Burmese.) Southwestern languages and Mru-Khongso all have, probably due to Burmese areal influence, P marking, just as in Burmese/Arakanese (Wheatley 2017; Okell 1995). Recall also the P marking we saw for Asho above, which is likely due to the same areal influence of Burmese/Arakanese.¹⁹

2.5 *Northwestern (formerly Old Kuki)*

A number of recent descriptions have appeared for Northwestern languages, allowing us to say a few words about the systems found there beyond what the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) tells us. I should also note that although Northwestern (Old Kuki) has long been recognized as a subgroup of SC, it is not yet clear whether these languages form a coherent unit, or whether some of them should be subgrouped together with other established groups, such as Central.

For instance, Hmar shows case-marking characteristics highly comparable to that of Northeastern and Core Central languages like Mizo and Laizo (Baruah and Bapui 1996). (36a) shows ergative marking by *-in* and no marking of the P participant; (36b) shows no marking for S:

(36) Hmar:

- a. *sái-in* *mət* *kùŋ* *à-fá:k*
 elephant-ERG banana tree 3-eat
 ‘elephants eat banana tree’ (Baruah and Bapui 1996: 45)
- b. *sàkéi* *à-in-tàh*
 tiger 3-sleep-?
 ‘the tiger is asleep’ (Baruah and Bapui 1996: 46)

Hrangkhoh shows a similar pattern:

(37) Hrangkhoh (Barman 2020):

- hi-pa-hi-in* *mizan-khan* *mizu* *a-that*
 DEM-man-DEM-ERG yesterday rat 3S-kill
 ‘He killed the rat yesterday.’

Essentially the same marking appears to be present in Koireng. According to Ch. Yashawanta Singh’s (2010) description, *hin* and *han* mark ‘proximal’ and ‘distal’ agents as seen in ((38a) and (38b), respectively); *hi* optionally marks accusative. (Note that *hi* and *ha* are also described as proximal and distal demonstrative elements.)

¹⁹ Mru has no marking for A/S and =*kōj* marks P. Khongso (Wright 2009), in fact, appears to have markers potentially related to those found in surrounding SC languages: =*ma*’, similar to the element seen in Khumi and Lemi, marks A/S, and =*həm* marks P, similar to the =*gan* we see marking P in Mro-Khimi.

(38) Koireng (Singh 2010: 51):

- a. *kəy-hin* *ŋa* *ki-cak*
 1-AGNT fish 1PP-eat
 ‘I eat fish (present)’
- b. *tombə-han* *tʰahoy* *ə-wok*
 tomba-AGNT Thahoj 3PP-beat
 ‘Tomba beats Thahoi (remote)’

It is apparent that the *-n* element found following these demonstrative elements is approximately the same one seen already in Hrangkhoh and Hmar. (Recall also the *-n* element appended to non-absolutive deictics in Hakha Lai mentioned above.)

Monsang has an ergative marker similar in form to these (*-iŋ*), but with an apparent person-based distributional split, according to Monsang and Kumar (2020):

(39) Monsang (Monsang and Kumar 2020: 53):

- a. *momo-iŋ* *úti* *khà* *á-tʰéʔ* *kà*
 Momo-ERG dog DEF 3SG-kill COP
 ‘Momo killed the dog.’
- b. *úti* *é-tʰəʔ* *kè*
 dog NMLZ-die COP
 ‘The dog died.’
- c. *kə(-iŋ)* *titi* *ké-ŋwù* *kè*
 I(-ERG) Titi 1SG-see COP
 ‘I saw Titi.’

Third person *As* bear the ergative marker, whereas first and second persons only have it under certain semantic and discourse-pragmatic conditions.²⁰

It is clear that all of these markers are related to each other, and given the final velar consonant, the element in Monsang reflects the original consonantism seen in the relevant instrumental marker elsewhere. However, it is not clear whether these are shared innovations with Core Central and Northeastern languages, or whether they may not have simply spread areally into adjacent Northwestern languages.

Another *A* marker seen in Northwestern is *=ŋi* in Lamkang:

- (40) Lamkang:
...humpii-paa=ngi *ardaa-da,* *mpaa* *m-chaak-dok* *thungbi...*
 tiger-MASC=AGT wait-SBJ:3:PFV their.father 3S-eat-ALREADY when
 ‘...when a tiger lay in wait for and ate their father, ...’ (Utt 2017)

²⁰ Konnerth (2021: 32) concludes that while this marker has an overall ergative distribution in Monsang, it is, as we often see elsewhere, more of a differential *A* marker than a strict ergative case marker.

A possible account of the unexpected form for the marker here is that an original *-ij* A marker has undergone metathesis, but it is unclear whether there is any independent evidence for such an account.²¹

Finally, there are also instances of a *=nA* marker for As in a handful of Northwestern languages.

The clearest evidence is found in the recent treatment of Chiru provided by Awan (2017).

(41) provides an example of A marking in the language:

- (41) Chiru:
àmá-nà *và-khàt* *mùk*
 3S-ERG bird-one see
 ‘S/he sees a bird.’ (Awan 2017: 175)

In Chote, *-nə* marks “nominative”, which is not found with S participants, but H. Brojen. Singh’s (2008) description suggests it is used optionally for A/P disambiguation, for “emphasis” and/or readings with narrow focus on the A, e.g.:

- (42) Chote:
uŋa-nə *əbay* *əwray-yəm-me*
 child-NOM book read-CON.ASP-SP
 ‘The child is reading the book (while others were doing something).’ (Singh 2008: 43)

There is an “accusative” marker, *-tə*, in Chote, as well, but it, too, appears to have some contrastive focal nuance when it occurs:

- (43) Chote accusative *-tə*:
əmo-nə *kəy-tə* *kok-ke*
 he-NOM I-ACC call-SP
 ‘He calls me (but not others).’ (Singh 2008: 44)

This element is clearly reminiscent of the *=tA* ergative and focus markers seen earlier in Maraic.

Finally, “nominative” in Tarao is marked by *-nə~-innə*. Ch. Yashawanta Singh’s grammar does not clearly explain the allomorphy of this marker, but the longer form appears to occur with diphthong-final bases and the shorter one elsewhere. *-innə* also consistently marks instrumental. See the examples in (44). As also seen in (44c), accusative is marked by *-tə*. Examples show this “nominative” occurs with A, but not S. It also does not occur on all instances of A.

- (44) Tarao:
 a. absence of nominative with S
 kəy *səkul-ə* *se-tuŋ*
 I school-LOC go-UNREAL
 ‘I will go to school.’ (Singh 2002: 41)

²¹ Thounaojam and Chelliah (2007) also note a P marker *-a* in Lamkang, which is apparently absent in this text example.

- b. absence of nominative with A
kəy əwa-nətə tuy ki-coy
 I river-ABL water 1PP-fetch
 ‘I fetch water from the river.’ (Singh 2002: 42)
- c. accusative marking of P
kəy-innə əmə-tə ki-ən
 I-NOM he-ACC 1PP-look
 ‘I look at him.’ (Singh 2002: 40)

To briefly summarize what the highly disparate Northwestern languages exhibit: there are A markers which in some cases show splits or pragmatic conditioning. There are also cases of P marking which may also involve considerations of information status. All of the markers so far attested are already familiar from relatively nearby Central or Northeastern languages.

2.6 Ergative (or ergative-like) markers outside of SC

Elements which are virtually identical in form and function to the =*nA* markers found in Northwestern, Southeastern, Northeastern, and Mara are widespread in Southern Naga and other nearby groups.

- Southern Naga: Tangkhul *-nə* ‘actor’ (Pettigrew 1918: 10; Arokianathan 1987: 46)
 Maring *-na* ‘ergative’ (LSI ii: 474)
 Sema (Sümi) *-no* ‘ergative’ (Sreedhar 1980: 107, Hutton 1916: 23) (cited as *-naa* by the LSI (ii: 223))
 Mongsen Ao *nə* ‘agentive’ (Coupe 2007: 173)
 Angami *-no* ‘ergative’ (LSI ii: 209)
 Mao *no* ‘ergative in embedded clauses’ (Giridhar 1994: 175)
 Lhota *-na* and *-no* ‘ergative’ (Acharya 1983: 103-104)
 Sopvoma *-naa* ‘ergative’ and ‘instrumental’ (LSI ii: 453)
- Meithei: *-nə* ‘agent/instrument marker’ (Chelliah 1997: 107, 128)
- Northern Naga and Tani languages have possible relatives of this marker in other functions

There do not appear to be comparable elements in Mru-Khongso or in Karbi (Konnerth 2020). Given the clearly related elements found in what are hypothetically some of the closest genetic relatives of SC (Southern Naga and Meithei), it is plausible that these elements are related, either due to common inheritance or due to contact. While LaPolla (2004, and elsewhere) firmly discounts the possibility of reconstructing such elements to a Proto-Tibeto-Burman level (as DeLancey (1984) suggests for a *na* case element related to the ones explored here), it would seem that reconstruction at some intermediate level may be feasible.

2.7 Summary and diachronic considerations

A summary of the main findings of this survey is given in Table 1.

marker	Core Central	Maraic	NE	SE	SW	NW
=nA	-	*	*	*	-	*
=iη	*	-	*	(*)	-	*
=ni'	*	-	-	(?)	-	-
=lA	-	(*)	-	*	*	-
=tA	-	*	(*)	-	-	-

Table 1. Distribution of A marking

This table pertains to A marking, where the story is more complicated; P marking is primarily relevant with respect to Southwestern languages, which show it universally, and for a handful of Southeastern and Northwestern languages.

Please note that this summary is not meant as a categorical claim that cognate morphology for a given element does not exist in the other subgroups. Within SC, there is probable cognate morphology for most of these markers in every subgroup, but it is not always used in core case marking. For instance, regarding the =ni' marker found in Core Central, part of the evidence that this was an originally copular element comes from the presence of copulas of approximately (or exactly) the form *ni* in many other SC languages. Similarly, while there is no =tA case marker found in Core Central, there is a =ta' element used with a function of contrastive focus in Hakha Lai, and so forth. I have included a parenthetic asterisk in cases where there would appear to be a related element in a closely related case-marking function, although the evidence for it is meager.²²

So, in general terms, while a large number of case-marking systems in SC have something which appears to involve ergative or split-ergative alignment, there are often caveats, such as optionality or pragmatic conditioning of the ergative marker, or the presence of differential object marking. So, strict ergative alignment in SC case marking is likely to be less of the norm than meets the eye.

To briefly comment on the apparent diachrony involved here, the =nA elements have the widest distribution, showing up in all hypothetical subgroups aside from Core Central and Southwestern. Perhaps next in terms of frequency are elements reflecting the *=iη instrumental marker, nearly always found with the form =in, i.e., showing the change of *η to *n* following *i* which is sporadic in Core Central and Northeastern. The remaining markers (e.g., the =tA forms found in Maraic, the =ni' forms found in a small pocket of Core Central, and the =lA markers found in Southwestern and in a small pocket of Southeastern) appear to be more localized developments.

²² It may be that the =tA elements marking P in Chote and Tarao are related to the other =tA elements included in the table, although this is unclear at this point. Similarly, Rengmitca's P marking in =na~=nō may bear some ultimate relationship to the =nA marking seen elsewhere.

Given these distributions, it would appear that the oldest layer of A marking in SC involves the =nA markers. This conclusion would fit well with the more widespread distribution of =nA marking of As which we see outside of SC. Extension of the instrumental marker *=iη to marking A presumably happened first in Core Central, and perhaps has spread via areal diffusion to Northeastern and Northwestern languages which have it, in some cases possibly prior to the widespread change of *η to n (as suggested by the forms found in Monsang and Lamkang). Alternatively, these could be parallel extensions of the instrumental marker to A marking in the different subgroups of SC. The remaining markers are all independent developments, although there may be some changes shared between individual languages (e.g., between the Southwestern languages in the use of =lA, or some subset of these languages, or between Hyow and Sumtu in their own distinct use of =lA.)

In the remainder of the paper, I will turn to some additional issues often complicating the analysis of case marking for SC languages. Most of these have already been previewed in this section.

3 Degree of fusion exhibited by case markers

Usually, no fusion of case markers with the element bearing case (i.e., a head noun, or a deictic/demonstrative element postposed to a head noun) is reported for SC languages.

3.1 Segmental fusion of case markers and host

In a few languages, segmental processes indicating fusion of case markers are evident: gemination, place assimilation, elision of the first vowel of a marker with vowel-final bases, etc. For instance, the Paite “nominative” is described as follows:

It has the following morphophonemic variations:

pín~tín~kín~mín~nín~ŋín~lín~in

1. The first seven allomorphs occur with an identical sound
2. *in* occurs elsewhere (Singh 2006: 81-82)

Other Paite case markers exhibit similar allomorphy, so it is fairly clear this is due to a systematic phonological process. Recall that there is similar allomorphy attested in closely related Thadou, as discussed in section 2.2.

3.2 Indication of case by tonal alternation

More significantly, there are some instances of a tonal indication of case marking, where a segmental marker appears to have fused with its host, resulting in modification of the tone on the final syllable of the case-marked element.

As already noted, genitival relationships appear to be fairly frequently marked tonally (e.g., Mizo, Tedim). Similarly, in Khumi, genitive is marked either by a segmental marker, =’é’, or by a shift in the tone of the last syllable in the genitive-marked entity:

Noun citation tone			Noun genitive tone	
1	low falling		6	checked low
2	low checked		6	checked low
3	high checked	<i>is realized as</i>	7	higher checked
4	rising		9	short rising
5	high falling		12	very high checked

Table 2. Citation tones and corresponding tonal instantiations of genitive case

For instance, in (45), the genitive status of *monkey* is marked by tone 6 occurring on the main syllable of *monkey*, which otherwise would bear tone 1.

- (45) Khumi:
*tuy*¹=*mö*³ *p*¹-*yä*²=*nö*³ *k*¹*lay*⁶ *k*¹*ni*¹
 water=FGR CAUS-float=NR monkey.GEN blanket
 ‘The water carried away the monkeys’ blankets.’ (18.137)

Similarly, and of greater consequence in the context of core case marking, Khumi P marking occurs via the segmental marker (homophonous with the locative) mentioned above in section 2.4; alternatively, the segmental marker can be absent, with the locative case-marked status of a P indicated solely by a change in the tone of its last syllable, according to Table 3.

Noun citation tone			Noun locative tone	
1	low falling		10	smooth rising
2	low checked		11	extended high
3	high checked	<i>is realized as</i>	11	extended high
4	rising		10	smooth rising
5	high falling		11	extended high

Table 3. Citation tones and corresponding tonal instantiations of locative case

(46) includes two instances in which, on the one hand, the element *-rë* ‘COUNT’ is marked tonally and, on the other, *ha* ‘one’ is marked tonally for locative case rather than bearing the segmental locative marker. These instances of tonal locative marking serve to indicate the P status of the referent ‘girl’ in both cases.

- (46) Khumi:
- | | | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| <i>...ha¹-rɛ¹⁰=lō¹</i> | <i>alu¹¹'ala¹</i> | <i>rewng¹</i> | <i>thiwng¹⁰</i> | <i>va³-yo³=te⁵</i> |
| one-COUNT.LOC=TOP | itchy.leaf | garden | inside.LOC | throw-IMPV=EVID |
-
- | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| <i>ha¹=lō¹</i> | <i>alɛ²-yo³</i> | <i>ha¹¹=lō¹</i> | <i>süng³-yo³</i> | <i>nō³=te⁵</i> |
| one=TOP | return-IMPV | one.LOC=TOP | bring.along-IMPV | QUOT=EVID |
- '... "One (girl) they threw into an itchy leaf garden. One went back. The other one (girl) they took along," she said.' (24.116a)

The basic takeaway here regarding tonal indications of case marking is the following: if the subtle tonal distinctions Khumi has were not detected, it might look like unmarked, highly-individuated P participants are possible, or that the locative case marking of them is more sporadic than careful tonal assessment shows it to be. Thus, in determining the alignment for a language which may make use of tone to mark grammatical distinctions, like Khumi does, unless the tone is meticulously analyzed, a claim that P is not case marked may not be reliable. And if P is not unmarked, or at least not marked the same as an S, the language does not have ergative alignment in terms of its case marking. All Kuki-Chin languages appear to have tone, so the possible grammatical use of tone is an important factor to consider in analysis of their alignment.

4 Case-like elements which are not case markers

4.1 Markers of information status

A further complication in many languages is that there are typically markers of information status, such as markers of topic and focus, acting alongside genuine case markers. In Khumi, as already mentioned, while there is basically only one core case marker (the locative used for differential marking of Ps), there are two high-frequency elements which at first glance might appear to be case markers. But these are really markers of information status: =lō¹ 'topic marker' and =mō³ 'foregrounder'.

The first of these, seen in examples (47a-c), is more straightforward. The topic marker is not infrequently seen in conjunction with other case markers like the locative (47c), so it appears to be in a different form class from case markers in the first place.

- (47) Khumi, uses of =lō¹:
- | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|
| a. | <i>...am¹po¹=lō¹</i> | <i>vāy⁴-vuy³=bo³</i> | <i>nay¹¹b'lō¹</i> |
| | father=TOP | return-PFV=REAL | then |
- '...the father returned (home) then.' (28.24)

- b. *nay¹b¹l¹=bo³ h¹ni³=l¹ ngam¹po¹⁰ pe¹-pe¹*
 then=REAL DEM=TOP father.LOC give-BEN
- h¹ni³=l¹ am¹⁰ pe¹-pe¹=n³*
 DEM=TOP mother.LOC give-BEN=NR
 ‘Then this one, she gave to the father, and this one, she gave to the mother...’ (21.80)
- c. *s¹khi⁴=e¹ döy²=n³ me¹töng⁵=a¹=l¹ ang¹tho¹rang⁴ s¹sa²=te⁵ pra⁴=n³*
 deer=GEN die=NR place=LOC=TOP rozelle.species all=EVID grow=NZ
 ‘Where Deer died, it became all overgrown with white rozelle.’ (32.114)

The other element tends strongly to mark lexical A participants in text material, as in example (48a), so it approximates an ergative marker. However, careful consideration of text material shows that it sometimes fails to occur with As, as seen in (48b), where it does not mark the A, ‘(the) teachers from the school’; it also occurs with Ss and other participant types, as shown in (49a-c).

(48) Khumi:

- a. occurrence of =*mö³* with lexical A:
tlängm³ uy¹köy³=m³ tla¹-hay³=b¹l¹
 suddenly tortoise=FGR fall-APP=SEQ
- sung¹ngay³ döy²=n³tla¹*
 wild.boar die=PST
 ‘Suddenly the tortoise fell on him, and the wild boar died.’ (10.16)
- b. failure of =*mö³* to occur with A:
m¹ kyewng¹⁰ lüng¹¹=n³ p¹lä²-’ü⁵’ü⁵=n³ tew²=bo³
 yeah school.LOC go.up.IRR=NR call-ITER=NR COP=REAL
- kyewng¹=ma⁶ masto¹=c⁵*
 school=ABL.GEN teacher=COLL
 ‘Yeah, they’ve called (me) to attend the school repeatedly, the teachers from the school.’ (45.178)

(49) Khumi:

- a. occurrence of =*mö³* with S:
m¹n³ö¹nay³ra⁴ alang²-c⁵ an² kha¹⁰ pyä⁴-thay³=n³
 why other-COLL wrestle time.LOC win-POT.NEG=NR
- kay¹=m³ ce²=ya¹*
 1S=FGR go=IRR
 ‘“Why are the others unable to win when they wrestle? I’ll go.”’ (42.21)

- b. occurrence of =*mö*³ with other (obliques, Ps, adverbials) non-A participants:
*m'nay*³ *vay*¹¹*vay*¹=*mö*³ *a'töyng*¹¹*kya*¹ *m'nö*¹
 how suddenly=FGR suddenly how

*kä*³-*thay*³-*kha*⁵=*'ü*⁴

know.how-POT-RHET.Q=EMOT

'How could they suddenly be able to (speak Chakma)?' (45.129)

As can be seen especially in example (49a), there is often a sense of contrastive focus associated with the marker, so that its use might be considered to be a part of the language's repertoire of focus marking strategies. Another apparently common use of =*mö*³ is with a participant which has fallen into a semi-active status and the participant is returned to the foreground in a narrative. (See Peterson 2011 and 2019 for further discussion.)

A further element which commonly occurs in SC languages and could easily be mistaken for a case marker of some sort, is a marker of what Konnerth (2012) terms additive focus. Such elements often have a central meaning comparable to 'also' or 'too', but they are also used to confer a sense of focal emphasis to an associated noun phrase. For instance, see (50), where the element =*pö* in Khumi does not simply indicate 'also', but rather has a sense roughly translatable by 'even' in English. In this example, a husband is complaining to his wife after she persistently nags him to return home rather than remain with his friends drinking.

(50) Khumi:

...*lew*² *nây*²=*nö*³ *ku*¹*lung*⁴ *nây*²=*nö*³ *ahây*¹=*hây*¹ *nipyu*=*hây*¹=*pö*¹
 language lots-NR ELAB(song) lots=NR friend=COM ELAB=COM=FOC

*a*¹¹*m*¹ *a*¹*ra*² *ne*¹-*thay*³-*lä*³=*nö*³ *pë*¹=*te*⁵ *n*¹*kha*⁴=*lö*¹
 rice.beer rice.liquor drink-POT-NEG=QUOT say=EVID then=TOP

'...You talk a lot! I can't drink even with my friends!' he said then.' (5.24)

Typically markers of additive focus may co-occur with elements identified as case markers in SC languages, which, as in the case of Khumi's topic marker and foregrounder, may be a clue as to their *non*-case marker status.

4.2 Demonstrative/deictic elements

Other languages have postnominal demonstrative/deictic elements that complicate the analysis of case. Recall the elements *han* and *hin* which Ch. Yashawanta Singh (2010) identifies as agentive case markers in Koireng, as discussed earlier. It is fairly clear that these are the independently attested deictic elements *ha* 'distal' and *hi* 'proximal', which have fused together with an *-in* ergative marker.

Other demonstrative/deictic elements might, by virtue of their tendency to be associated with nouns having a particular discourse status, be (mistakenly?) identified as markers of absolutive case. It is worth bearing in mind that so-called 'marked absolutive' is cross-linguistically extremely rare; normally absolutive is an unmarked case in languages exhibiting ergative/absolutive nominal

alignment, just as nominative typically does not involve explicit marking in languages with nominative/accusative nominal alignment.

Thus, what might appear to be case markers actually may be members of some other form class, e.g., members of the demonstrative/deictic class, or members of a class marking information status. Again, what one might analyze (incorrectly) as a case marker might crucially affect the assessment one has of a language's alignment.

5 Concluding remarks

While it is not possible to generalize fully about the alignment of core grammatical relations in SC languages, there is a pronounced tendency for them to have an ergative/absolutive appearance, with Southwestern languages constituting a consistent exception so far. Depending on the subgroup of the family, there are formal similarities in the markers used. We can discern a probable chronology for different markers based on their distribution.

I hope that the data considered here will make it clear that even a superficially straightforward ergative/absolutive patterning for a given language is rarely monolithic. There may be splits in the distribution of ergative marking which we have not yet detected. What appears to be an ergative marker may not even be a case marker at all; rather, it may be an element involved in marking information status like topic or focus.

To date, most analyses of SC languages are based primarily on elicited data and constructed sentences with little attention paid to discourse context. It is crucial that our future research in SC languages involve collection of text corpora, and especially data from face-to-face conversation. Experimental methods may also be required to tease out fine usage details. It is through these types of data that we may best arrive at accurate conclusions regarding the use of elements which may be markers either of case or information status, in particular.

In this paper I have also emphasized the potential importance of tonal alternations in marking core grammatical relations. When, as for the typical SC language, we have only a nascent understanding of the tonal system, it can be difficult to assess what possible ramifications tonal alternations may have for our overall analysis of a language's morphosyntax.

Indeed, despite the challenges it presents, tone is actually only an easier piece of the puzzle. Ozerov's (2014) work on information structure in Burmese makes crucial reference to intonational characteristics of utterances; this should strongly suggest to us that adequate characterizations of specific morphological (case/information status) markers may require not only study of segmental and tonal features of SC languages, but will also depend on a grasp of intonational aspects of the utterances they are used in. As Lotven points out in his contribution to this volume, intonation is a virtually untouched area in the study of SC languages, Zakaria's (2018) work with Hyow being a noteworthy exception.

ABBREVIATIONS

1	first person	INTERR	interrogative
2	second person	IRR	irrealis
3	third person	IPFV	imperfective
A	A participant (transitive subject)	ITER	iterative
ABL	ablative	LOC	locative
ACC	accusative	MAL	malefactive
AGR	agreement	MID	middle
AGNT	agent	NEG	negative
AGT	agent	NOM	nominative
ALL	allative	NF	non-final coordinating marker
ANT	anterior	NF	non-future
APP	applicative	NMLZ	nominalizer
AUG	augmentative	NMLZR	nominalizer
B	base (verb form)	NON.FUT	non-future
BEN	benefactive	NR	nominalizer
CAUS	causative	NUM	numeral root
CL	classifier	NZR	nominalizer
CL.FIN	finite clause	O	object
COLL	collective	OBJ	object
COM	comitative	OBLIG	obligative
CON.ASP	continuous aspect	P	P participant (trans. object)
CONCL	conclusive	P	plural
CONJ	conjunction	PART	particle
COP	copula	PFV	perfective
D	derived (verb form)	PL	plural
D	dual	POSS	possessive
DAT	dative	POT	potential
DECL	declarative	PP	pronominal prefix
DEF	definite	PR	personal name
DEIC	deictic	PRF	perfective
DEM	demonstrative	PROHIB	prohibitive
DIM	diminutive	PROX	proximal
DIR	directional	PRT	particle
DLIM	delimitative	PST	past
DU	dual	PW	pronominal word
DUR	durative	QUOT	quotative particle
ELAB	elaboration	R.EVID	reported evidential
EMOT	emotive	REAL	realis
EMPH	emphasis	REL	relativizer
ERG	ergative	RHET.Q	rhetorical question
EVID	hearsay evidential	S	singular
FGR	foregrounder	S	subject
FOC	focus	S	S participant (intrans. subject)

FUT	future	SBJ	subject
GEN	genitive	SEQ	sequential
HAB	habitual	SG	singular
I	stem I (verb form)	SP	sentence particle
II	stem II (verb form)	SUBJ	subject
IMPFV	imperfective	TOP	topic
INST	instrumental	ULT	ultimative
INTENS	intensifier		

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