

## WHAT DETERMINES ANTIPASSIVE IN DYIRBAL?

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### *1. Introduction*

Just as the question arises what conditions active versus passive in English, the question arises in ergative languages with an antipassive construction what conditions the choice between basic and antipassive clauses. In this paper, I address this question with respect to the antipassive construction in Dyirbal, a Pama-Nyungan Australian language described by Dixon (1972). Example (1) illustrates a basic or ergative clause and (2) is a propositionally equivalent antipassive clause.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) bala-n            d̥ugumbil    ba-ŋgu-l        yaɾa-ŋgu    balga-n  
there,abs-nc<sub>2</sub>    woman,abs    there-erg-nc<sub>1</sub>    man-erg    hit-pres/past  
Man is hitting woman. (Dixon 1972: 65)
- (2) bayi            yaɾa        ba-gu-n        d̥ugumbil-gu    balgal-ŋa-ŋu  
there,abs,nc<sub>1</sub>    man,abs    there-dat-nc<sub>2</sub>    woman-dat    hit-antipassive-pres/past  
Man is hitting woman. (Dixon 1972: 66)

Superficially, the two constructions differ in that in ergative clauses, the A (transitive subject) occurs in the ergative case and the P (object) occurs in the absolutive case, while in antipassive clauses, the A occurs in the absolutive case and the P occurs in the dative or instrumental case. In addition, the verb in an antipassive clause bears an antipassive suffix. Dixon (1972) discusses a variety of syntactic differences between the two kinds of clauses that show that the two kinds of clauses differ not only in case marking but also in their syntactic structure. These differences involve syntactic properties associated with absolutive nominals which are associated with the P in an ergative clause, but with the A in an antipassive clause.

The issue addressed in this paper is the following discourse question: what determines the choice in Dyirbal between the use of an antipassive clause rather than its propositionally equivalent ergative clause? The claims of this paper are based on data in Cooreman (1988) and additional data which Cooreman has kindly provided me with, but I will argue for a rather different interpretation of this data from that proposed by Cooreman. The claim of hers that I will address here is not the primary thesis of her paper. The main purpose of her paper is to argue that the syntactic ergativity of Dyirbal does not reflect a discourse structure radically different from that found in syntactically accusative languages. She argues that A's in Dyirbal texts tend to be more topical than P's (just as they are in other languages), contrary to what some claims of others might be taken to imply, such as the characterization of the absolutive in Dyirbal by Mallinson and Blake (1981) as a "grammaticalized topic". I have no quarrel with this central claim of her paper and her evidence on this point seems quite convincing.

The claim of Cooreman's that I take issue with here is one she expresses in a number of similar ways in a number of places in her paper:

"... the topicality of the objects [i.e. P's] in the antipassive ... is consistently lower than the topicality of the objects [P's] in the ergative construction." (p. 728)

"... the *-ŋay* antipassive ... marks transitive propositions in which the referent of the objects [i.e. P's] on this minimized discourse level is new, hence low in topicality" (p. 730)

"The antipassive ... can be characterized as a special construction marking the exceptionally low topicality of an object [i.e. P] in a transitive proposition ..." (p. 743)

I assume that these claims are to be taken as implying something like (3).

- (3) The antipassive marks transitive propositions *as ones* in which the referent of the object [i.e. P] on this minimized discourse level is new, hence low in topicality.

While (3) is not logically entailed by Cooreman's claim, it is difficult to see the import of her claim if it is not intended. I will argue later in this paper that (3) is not the case. Cooreman's claim also appears to imply a weaker claim, that given in (4).

- (4) The antipassive in Dyirbal is used when the P is low in topicality.

Thus Cooreman's claims seem to imply one hypothesis regarding the choice of ergative clause versus antipassive clause, that given in (5).<sup>2</sup>

- (5) The antipassive in Dyirbal is used if and only if the P is low in topicality.

I will argue here against (5), arguing that there is no evidence that topicality *per se* plays any role in the choice of the antipassive construction. I will argue that there is in fact no evidence that discourse factors play any role in the determination of when antipassive is used in Dyirbal. In the first part of the paper I will specifically argue that discourse factors play no role, though I will retreat from this position somewhat in the latter part of the paper. One of my primary purposes is to illustrate a potential methodological problem with the topic continuity method of Givón (1983), which Cooreman uses to support her claims about the topicality of P's in antipassive clauses.

## 2. *The referential distance of P's in antipassive clauses*

Cooreman's conclusions regarding the low topicality of P's in antipassive clauses in Dyirbal are based on a set of texts that included 313 clauses coding transitive propositions. 60 (or 19.2%) of these clauses were antipassive. Except for 14 false reflexive clauses (which resemble antipassives in a number of ways, but which I will ignore here), the remaining 239 clauses (making up 76.3% of the total) were ergative. Cooreman's conclusions regarding the low topicality of P's in antipassive clauses are based on results she obtained using the topic continuity measures of Givón (1983). Table 1 reorganizes data from Tables 2 and 3 in Cooreman's paper. The data for antipassive is based on 44 of the 60 antipassives in the texts she examined, excluding 16 antipassives where the P is unspecified. The data cited here involves just one text measure, referential distance (RD), the mean number of clauses back to a previous reference in the text, with a referential distance of 20 assigned to nominals without a previous reference in the preceding 20 clauses.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1  
Mean Referential Distance<sup>4</sup>  
(with number of tokens in parentheses)

	A in ergative clause	A in antipassive clause	P in ergative clause	P in antipassive clause
Zero-anaphora	1.30 (125)	1.00 (42)	1.27 (134)	2.43 (7)
Noun marker	1.44 (50)	---- (0)	3.92 (13)	3.25 (4)
NP with noun	11.26 (38)	11.00 (2)	10.59 (75)	13.15 (33)
Overall	3.45 (225)	1.45 (44)	5.19 (225)	10.57 (44)

Cooreman's evidence for her claim that P's are less topical in antipassive clauses than they are in ergative clauses is largely based on the overall mean referential distance figures for P's in the two kinds of clauses given at the foot of the last two columns in Table 1: the mean RD for P's in ergative clauses is 5.19 while the mean RD for P's in antipassive clauses is 10.57, showing that on the average, the distance back to a reference in an earlier clause is less for P's in ergative clauses than it is for P's in antipassive clauses. If we assume that referential distance is diagnostic to some extent of the topicality of a nominal, these figures do suggest that P's in antipassive clauses tend to be less topical than P's in ergative clauses. I will argue, however, that this effect is epiphenomenal.

### 3. *The three uses of antipassive*

Cooreman herself notes that the 60 antipassive clauses fall into three subcategories: 16 of these antipassives involve unspecified P's (p. 728); 4 of them involve indefinite nonreferential P's; and the remaining 40 of them occur noninitially in what Dixon (1972) calls *topic chains*, sequences of clauses which form a single intonational unit and within which the syntax requires that, subject to a couple of systematic exceptions, the absolutive nominals in adjacent clauses be coreferential.

Let us consider each of these three uses of antipassive from the perspective of the question of what conditions the use of antipassive. Consider first the use of antipassive when the P is not specified, because its reference is unknown or irrelevant, as in (6).

- (6) bayi                      yaɾa      balgal-ŋa-ju  
 there,abs,nc<sub>1</sub>    man,abs    hit-antipassive-pres/past  
 Man is hitting (someone). (Dixon 1972: 70)

This use accounts for 16 of the 60 antipassives in the texts Cooreman examined. This use of antipassive is analogous to the use of passive in English when no *by*-phrase occurs, as in *John was killed*. Although antipassives like (6) clearly involve P's of low topicality, there is a critical difference between such uses of antipassive and ones for which there exists an ergative paraphrase. Since antipassives like (6) lack an ergative paraphrase, the use of antipassive in such contexts is, as Cooreman herself admits, obligatory. Hence such uses of antipassive are syntactically or semantically determined since there is no syntactic alternation to be determined by discourse factors. If this were the only use of antipassive in Dyirbal, we would just say that antipassive is used with transitive verbs when the P is unspecified, and there would be no reason to mention the low topicality of the object.<sup>5</sup>

Consider next the use of antipassive in clauses in which the P is nonreferential. There are 4 instances of this among the 60 antipassives in Cooreman's texts. Although Cooreman does not cite an example of this use, she

explains (p.c.) that these involve a nonspecific P, as in English *He is looking for a wallaby*, where no particular wallaby is intended. Since such nonreferential P's apparently cannot be expressed by an absolutive in an ergative clause, the choice of antipassive in such instances is semantically determined. In other words, if the proposition the speaker wishes to express is one in which the P is nonreferential, then the antipassive must be used. Again, although the P in such cases is clearly of low topicality, there is no reason to appeal to a discourse notion of low topicality to explain them, since no discourse-governed alternation is involved.

These first two uses of antipassive both lack a propositionally equivalent ergative form and hence are not discourse-determined. If they were just extreme instances of a use of antipassive which in other instances was discourse-determined by low topicality, it might be appropriate to describe these as instances of a general category of clauses with a low-topical P. But as I will argue in discussing the third use of antipassive, there is no evidence that even this is the case.

The most common use of antipassive in the texts Cooreman examined (40 out of 60) involves noninitial clauses in topic chains, in which antipassive is used because the A is coreferential to the absolutive of the preceding clause, as in the second clause in (7) and the third clause in (8).

- (7) *bayi yaṛa walma-ṅu*  
 there,abs,nc<sub>1</sub> man,abs get.up-pres/past
- bayi ba-gu-n ḍugumbil-gu balgal-ṅay-gu*  
 there,abs,nc<sub>1</sub> there-dat-nc<sub>2</sub> woman-dat hit-antipassive-purp

The man got up to hit the woman. (Cooreman 1988: 729)

- (8) *bulgan bayi wabu-ṅga wayмба-ṅu*  
 big,abs there,abs,nc<sub>1</sub> scrubs-loc walk-pres/past
- The elder went out into the scrubs

(∅) *bilin-ḍa-ṅu*  
 (abs) climb-repet-pres/past  
 climbing (all the trees)

(∅) *ḍambu-ṅu bapil-ṅa-ṅu*  
 (abs) grubs-instr split-antipassive-pres/past  
 and chopping grubs

(∅) *ṅurba-ṅu*  
 (abs) return-pres/past  
 then he returned home (Cooreman 1988: 732-733)

The antipassive is obligatory in the second clause in (7) and in the third clause in (8) in order to satisfy the requirement that absolutives in adjacent clauses within a topic chain be coreferential. If the second clause in (7) had not been antipassive, then the pronominal *bayi* (which refers back to *bayi yaṛa* 'the man', which functions as absolutive in the first clause) would have been ergative, thereby violating the requirement that absolutives in adjacent clauses must be coreferential. What this means is that if the A of a clause is coreferential to the absolutive in the preceding clause, the antipassive *must* be used, since only in antipassive clauses do A's occur in the absolutive case. Now since the syntax requires the use of the antipassive in these cases, it is again misleading to describe them as if the choice were discourse-conditioned. And there is certainly no basis for describing such cases as involving low topicality of the P, since in these contexts, antipassive must be used regardless of the topicality of the P.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. *Two hypotheses compared*

Let us compare then two hypotheses regarding the use of antipassive in Dyirbal:

- (9) Hypothesis A: Antipassive is used if and only if the P is of low topicality.
- (10) Hypothesis B: Antipassive is used if and only if one of the following three conditions holds:
- a. the P is unspecified;
  - b. the P is indefinite nonreferential;
  - c. the clause is in a topic chain and the A is coreferential to the absolutive in the preceding clause.

Hypothesis A is what Cooreman's claims suggest. I will argue that Hypothesis B is the superior hypothesis. It follows from Cooreman's own data that Hypothesis B is observationally adequate, at least as an account of the data in the texts that she examined.<sup>7</sup> While Hypothesis A might seem to capture a generalization that is left unexpressed in Hypothesis B, I will argue that Hypothesis A fails at the level of observational adequacy.

Evaluating the predictions of Hypothesis A is somewhat hampered by possible lack of precision in the term *topic*. However, the problem with Hypothesis A is present regardless of one's notion of topic and can be illustrated by assuming, for the sake of argument, a simplistic notion of *topic*, defined simply in terms of referential distance (RD). In other words, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, a notion of *topic* such that referential distance is an accurate index of the topicality of a noun phrase. Then Hypothesis A claims that antipassive will be used when the RD is high but not when it is low. This is still vague, since it doesn't specify where the cutoff point is. But it is easy to see that there can be no cutoff point, no value  $n$  such that if the RD of the P is greater than  $n$  then antipassive is used but if the RD is less than  $n$  then the ergative is used. For, ignoring the first two uses of antipassive, when the P is unspecified or nonreferential, if the clause in question is in a topic chain, then whether antipassive is used or not depends entirely on whether the A of the clause was absolutive in the preceding clause. If the A was absolutive in the preceding clause, then antipassive is used, no matter how low the RD of the P is. Cooreman reports instances in which the P in an antipassive clause has a referential distance of 2. Thus, except for the absence of examples (in the texts Cooreman examined) of P's in antipassive clauses with an RD of 1, the full range of possible RD values for P's is attested. Nor, as discussed below, is there any reason to believe that there is any prohibition against antipassives in which the P has an antecedent in the preceding clause.

Conversely, if neither the A nor the P was absolutive in the preceding clause, then it will be necessary to start a new topic chain. And, at least in the texts Cooreman examined, antipassive is never used in the first clause of a topic chain (unless the P is unspecified or nonreferential). In such contexts, the ergative form will be used, even if the P has no previous reference in the discourse, and thus has an RD of 20. In short the RD of the P appears not to play any role in determining the choice of ergative versus antipassive.<sup>8</sup>

#### 5. *Explaining away Cooreman's evidence*

How then do we explain the evidence from Tables 1 and 2 that Cooreman cites in support of her conclusion regarding a relationship between the topicality of P's and the choice of ergative versus antipassive? If we examine the figures in these tables more closely, we find that this difference in RD between P's in the

two kinds of clauses turns out to be a side-effect of the syntactic factors conditioning the use of antipassive. Cooreman herself notes that there are no instances in her data of a P in an antipassive clause with an RD of 1. On the other hand, it is very common for P's in ergative clauses to have an RD of 1, to have an antecedent in the immediately preceding clause; in fact it is possible to extrapolate from the data in Table 1 that at least 40% of P's in ergative clauses have an RD of 1. And the differences in the mean RD of P's in the two kinds of clauses appears to be largely if not entirely attributable to this difference in the distribution of P's with an RD of 1. The high frequency of P's with an RD of 1 in ergative clauses apparently reflects the nature of topic chains: if an ergative clause occurs noninitially in a topic chain then the P will necessarily have an RD of 1 since the P will be absolutive in the ergative clause and in order to satisfy the same-absolutive restriction within topic chains, the P would have to be coreferential to the absolutive in the immediately preceding clause. On the other hand, the infrequency of P's with an RD of 1 in antipassive clauses appears to simply reflect the fact that the number of situations where the syntax allows this to happen is highly restricted. Since antipassive clauses in which P's have antecedents in the discourse only occur noninitially in topic chains when the A is absolutive in the preceding clause, a P with an RD of 1 in an antipassive clause could only arise when both the A and the P have antecedents in the preceding clause, and the A is absolutive in the preceding clause and the P something other than absolutive, as in the hypothetical example in (11).

- (11) man-erg<sub>i</sub> give woman-abs<sub>j</sub> stick-instr<sub>k</sub>; Ø(abs)<sub>j</sub> throw-antipassive Ø(dat)<sub>k</sub>  
The man gave the woman a stick and she threw it.

I assume, from the fact that Cooreman found no instances of clauses like this in the body of texts she examined, that these situations arise infrequently.

In short, the fact that P's in ergative clauses have a lower mean RD than P's in antipassive clauses is attributable to the fact that P's in ergative clauses far more often have antecedents in the preceding clause, and the latter fact is attributable to the syntactic conditions on topic chains. Hence the higher mean referential distance of P's in antipassive clauses is a side effect of the syntactic conditions on the use of antipassive and ergative clauses and does not indicate that topicality plays any role in the choice of ergative versus antipassive. Hence we can conclude that Hypothesis A is inadequate as an answer to the question of what determines antipassive in Dyirbal.

In short, the differences in RD figures between ergative and antipassive clauses are explainable largely in terms of factors that have nothing to do with RD per se. This illustrates a potential risk in the topic continuity method: the data may appear to support a given hypothesis but be demonstrably explainable in other terms. The topic continuity method may be useful in examining syntactic alternations that are determined by discourse factors, but it is important that such counts be restricted to instances where there is discourse-conditioned alternation, and I have argued that none of the uses of antipassive in Dyirbal have this property.

### 6. A weakness in the argument

Now there is one potentially serious weakness in the argument as presented so far. Even if the use of antipassive is required by the particular syntactic construction employed in these contexts, it remains possible that the choice of that other construction is itself partly determined by the topicality of the P. If such were the case, one might argue that the use of antipassive is conditioned, at least indirectly, by the topicality of the P. Nor need this

conditioning be indirect. It might be that it is misleading from a discourse production point of view to say that the use of antipassive is determined by the choice of construction which requires it. It is possible that from a discourse production point of view, the topicality of the object is a direct causal factor in the choice of using an antipassive and that once that choice has been made, it becomes possible for the speaker to choose the construction which requires an antipassive. In other words, if the speaker had chosen to use an ergative clause instead, they would not have been free to use the construction that would have required an antipassive but would have had to use some other construction instead.

How plausible is this scenario in the present context? The constraints requiring coreferentiality of absolutes across clauses operate within the topic chains. In general, a text consists of a sequence of these topic chains, and the constraints on coreferentiality do not apply *between* topic chains, only *within* topic chains. Thus, between any two clauses, the speaker has, in a sense, a choice as to whether to continue the ongoing chain or to start a new one. One possibility is that these decisions are based entirely on thematic considerations, that the boundaries between clause chains reflect natural thematic boundaries and that the topic chains represent natural thematic units. If that is the case, then the fact that a clause with a semantic A coreferential to the absolute in the preceding clause must be antipassive is forced by the fact that thematic considerations require that the clause in question be a continuation of the current clause chain. In other words, the thematic considerations would preclude the possibility of starting a new topic chain, which would have meant that antipassive would not have been required. Thus if boundaries between topic chains are determined entirely on the basis of such thematic considerations, then the choice of ergative or antipassive is determined on the basis of syntactic considerations, even though the particular syntactic construction is itself determined by discourse factors.

A second possibility, however, is that the decisions as to whether to continue a topic chain or start a new one are not based entirely on thematic considerations but are based partly on the topicality of the P. In other words, it is at least a logical possibility that if the P is more topical, then the ergative construction is used, in which case (in the contexts under discussion) it would be necessary to start a new topic chain, but that if the P is less topical, antipassive is used, thereby making it possible to continue the existing topic chain. If such a scenario were true one could maintain the view that the choice of antipassive is determined by the topicality of the P, even though the choice of antipassive within topic chains is syntactically determined. Unfortunately, the way Cooreman organizes her topic continuity data, there is no way to determine whether this is a possible way to view the situation.

Significantly, though, there is evidence in Cooreman's data that suggests that boundaries between chains are determined not only by thematic factors but also by the nature of coreference links across clause boundaries. The clauses in topic chains that require their absolute to be coreferential to the absolute in the preceding clause fall into two morphological subtypes, purposive constructions and what Cooreman calls coordinate constructions. The range of contexts in which the purposive construction is used is somewhat broader than what the name might suggest. It is used, not only in contexts where the relationship is one of purpose in the narrowest sense of the terms, where English would use an infinitive of purpose (*I got up to go uphill*), but also in contexts in which there is some sort of causal connection between the events of the two clauses. According to Dixon (1972: 68) the purposive is used if the event in the first clause is a necessary preliminary to the event in the second clause or if the event in the second clause is a natural consequence of the event in the first clause. Thus a sentence meaning

*The man hit the woman and knocked her down* would occur in Dyirbal with a purposive in the second clause if the woman fell down as a consequence of the man hit hitting her (though I assume not if these were two independent acts). In the case of purposive constructions, the scenario discussed in the preceding paragraph seems somewhat unlikely, since these purposive constructions involve a strong thematic link between the two clauses. It is difficult to know for sure, however, without knowing more about the language and without examining texts.

On the other hand, the possibility that topic chain boundaries might be partly sensitive to factors like the topicality of the P is somewhat more plausible in the case of coordinate constructions since they do not involve the same thematic link. Table 2, which reorganizes some of the data in Cooreman's Table 7 (p. 739), provides evidence that suggests that decisions as to where to place boundaries between topic chains may be determined at least partly by the nature of coreference links between clauses.

Table 2<sup>9</sup>  
Coreference Links Between Adjacent Clauses

	coordinate within chain	between chains
S-S	<b>22 (88%)</b>	3 (12%)
S-P	<b>16 (94%)</b>	1 (6%)
P-S	<b>14 (93%)</b>	1 (7%)
P-P	<b>7 (70%)</b>	3 (30%)
S-A	8 (36%)	<b>14 (64%)</b>
P-A	2 (33%)	<b>4 (67%)</b>
A-A	18 (46%)	<b>21 (54%)</b>
A-S	9 (43%)	<b>12 (57%)</b>
A-P	0 (0%)	<b>1 (100%)</b>
A-A & P-P	<b>35 (88%)</b>	5 (13%)
A-P & P-A	<b>2 (100%)</b>	0 (0%)

The first four types in this table more often occur within chains. These are ones in which both nominals are S's or P's, what we might call semantically absolutive. The next five types more often occur across chain boundaries. These are ones in which at least one of the nominals is an A. The apparent generalization is that links in which both nominals are S or P occur more often within chains, other links occur more often across chain boundaries. The A-A & P-P type conforms to this since it occurs more often within chains, and it involves an P-P link. The last type does not conform (since there is no absolutive link, yet both are within clauses) but there are only two tokens of this type.

Although it is conceivable that the pattern described in the last paragraph reflects something about thematic structure, there is no reason to think it does. More likely, it reflects the ergative nature of Dyirbal. What it suggests is that one factor, apart from thematic structure, which governs decisions as to what to put within a chain is what the nature of coreference links between the clauses is. If a link is between S's and P's, semantic absolutes, the speaker is more likely to place the two clauses within a chain. But if one of the nominals is an A, then either a marked construction (like antipassive) must be used (though there is some question about A-A links, cf. Cooreman pp. 733-735, plus footnotes 3 and 4) or a new clause chain is necessary. The fact that new clause chains occur more often in such cases suggests that they are determined by the fact that otherwise an absolutive-absolutive link would not occur unless a marked construction were used.



What all this suggests is that when there is an S-A or P-A link, the speaker faces a choice as to whether to use an antipassive or start a new chain. The fact that new chains occur more often in such situations implies that this decision is not determined entirely by thematic structure. While it is probable that thematic structure plays a role in this decision, something else must be relevant as well. One cannot tell from Cooreman's data what that other factor is, but it is certainly possible that it is the topicality of the P. Hence the fact that antipassive is required in coordinate constructions if the coreferential nominal in the second clause is an A does not necessarily entail that Cooreman's claim is wrong. Unfortunately, one cannot tell from Cooreman's data whether such is the case. To do that, one would have to compare the topic continuity of P's in coordinate antipassive clauses in topic chains with the topic continuity of P's in ergative clauses at the beginning of topic chains when the A of that clause is the absolutive of the last clause of the preceding topic chain.

On the other hand, even if the data were to show that P's in antipassive clauses tend to be less topical than P's in ergative clauses of the sort just mentioned, we could only conclude that antipassive is determined *partly* by the topicality of the P. For one thing, topic chain boundaries are probably determined by thematic structure as well. In other words, it might be the case that in instances in which a clause is strongly connected thematically with the preceding clause, it will occur in that clause chain regardless of the topicality of the P. Second, the account outlined in the preceding paragraph applies only to coordinate structures; presumably with purposive constructions, the nature of the link is such that the option of a clause chain boundary does not arise. And third, although Cooreman does not give direct data on this particular point, there is reason to believe that antipassive occurs much more commonly in purposive clauses than in the coordinate construction. If I read her Table 7 correctly, it indicates that among the 60 antipassive clauses in the texts she examined, 48 occurred in purposive constructions and 12 in coordinate ones. This includes the 16 antipassives in which the P is unspecified and the 4 antipassives in which the P is nonreferential. Apparently for at least some of these 20 antipassives, there are two explanations for the use of antipassive: the syntactic requirements of the construction in which they occurred and the absence or nonreferentiality of the P. But this leaves only 12 antipassives in coordinate clauses. But since some of these 12 antipassives may involve an unspecified P or a nonreferential P and since some of these antipassive clauses may occur in the same topic chain as the preceding clause for thematic reasons, the number of antipassives in topic chains that *could* have been conditioned by the low topicality of the P is necessarily a very small percentage of the total number of antipassives.

We are left in a position, then, of concluding that the topicality of the P plays no role in determining the use of antipassive in Dyirbal, or that at most it plays a role in a small minority of cases. We have no concrete evidence in Cooreman's data that it plays even a minor role, though there is some circumstantial evidence that it may. The evidence that Cooreman presents in support of her claim regarding the relationship between topicality and P's in antipassive clauses is explainable in terms of other factors. The answer to the question posed by the title to this paper is that the three factors outlined in Hypothesis B determine antipassive, and hence that there is no evidence that discourse factors play any role in the choice of antipassive, though it remains possible that the factors determining topic chain boundaries include considerations of whether not having a topic chain boundary would result in an antipassive, and that the topicality of the P may play some role in determining whether to continue a topic chain with an antipassive or start a new topic chain with an ergative clause.

## 7. Conclusion

The general methodological conclusion, therefore, is that in applying the topic continuity method, one should restrict its application to instances where there is a syntactic alternation that might be discourse-governed. Including examples where one alternant is required syntactically or semantically (where there is only one way to express the proposition being expressed) only introduces noise into one's data that may either obscure a real pattern or create the illusion of a nonexistent pattern, as appears to be the case with Cooreman's data. On the other hand, I should stress that the problem outlined here is not endemic to the methodology, but only illustrates how the methodology ought to be applied. The central purpose of Cooreman's paper, that of showing that A's are just as topical in Dyirbal as they are in other languages, is successfully achieved by use of the methodology.

It should be noted that in some respects, the first two uses of antipassive, in which the P is unspecified or nonreferential, do conform more closely to Cooreman's characterization, in that both cases involve P's that are highly nontopical. These instances of antipassive are determined by the properties of the P and could be described as backgrounding antipassives (cf. Foley and Van Valin 1985). On the other hand, the use of antipassive in topic chains is determined by the properties of the A; these uses of antipassive might be described as foregrounding antipassives, since they involve foregrounding the A in the sense that the A in such antipassive clauses must be coreferential to the absolutive in the preceding clause. There is clearly a unifying theme connecting these backgrounding and foregrounding uses of antipassive, since backgrounding the P and foregrounding the A both affect the *relative* status of the A and P in a similar way. The functions of antipassive are thus like the meanings of a polysemous morpheme: while it is necessary to distinguish different functions, these functions are clearly related.<sup>10</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

This paper has benefited from helpful comments from Ann Cooreman and David Wilkins.

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations are used in the glosses of examples in this paper: abs (absolutive), nc<sub>i</sub> (noun class i), erg (ergative), pres/past (present or past), dat (dative), purp (purpose), loc (locative), repet (repetitive), instr (instrumental).

<sup>2</sup> Cooreman herself does not claim (5) and in fact specifically rejects it (p.c.).

<sup>3</sup> I ignore here issues surrounding the question of to what extent topic continuity measures, like referential distance, measure topicality. The term *topic* is used by different linguists to refer to a number of distinct notions. For the purposes of this paper, the term *topic* can be interpreted as *Cooreman's notion of topic*.

<sup>4</sup> The figures for ergative clauses in Table 1 do not add up to the stated total of 225 because the total includes a number of additional types of NPs, such as proper names and object clauses. The 239 ergative clauses mentioned previously includes 14 additional clauses in which the A is not specified.

<sup>5</sup> There is a sense in which antipassive clauses with an unspecified P might be considered a discourse-governed alternation. And while Thompson (1987) describes the "agentless" passive in English as syntactically determined, there is also a sense in which one might consider this use of passive to be discourse-governed. Namely, to at least some extent, the decision to use an agentless

passive in English may be triggered by a decision by the speaker not to mention the agent, either because it is unimportant or for some other reason. There may be instances of antipassive clauses in Dyirbal in which the P is unspecified for similar reasons. In so far as the decisions not to specify the P in such instances reflect the extremely low topicality of the P, this use of antipassive might indeed be said to be triggered by the low topicality of the P. The major point of this paper, however, is that the topicality of P's does not affect the use of antipassive when the P is specified (and referential). Note that the RD (referential distance) for P's in the two kinds of clauses shown in Table 1 is based on clauses in which the P is specified. It is the difference in RD for *those* clauses that I argue here is epiphenomenal.

<sup>6</sup> There is one systematic exception to the requirement that adjacent clauses within a topic chain involve coreferential absolutes. Namely, if the S or P in a clause is coreferential to the ergative nominal in the preceding clause, then the verb is marked with a suffix *-ɲura*, indicating this. I will ignore the complications presented by this clause type in this paper since they are orthogonal to the issues at hand.

<sup>7</sup> Though not attested for antipassive in the data Cooreman examined, Dixon (1972: 80) describes a fourth use of antipassive, an anticipatory use where the antipassive is used in a clause because the A is going to be the absolute of the *next* clause. (There is one instance of a "false reflexive" clause in the texts Cooreman examined that has this property, her (22) on p. 733; in general, false reflexives strongly resemble antipassives, and seem to be a kind of antipassive from a functional point of view.) To cover this possibility, Hypothesis B should really be complicated accordingly, but I ignore this possibility throughout this paper since the primary point of this paper is methodological, and incorporating this possibility into the discussion would only complicate discussion. There appear to be other infrequent uses of antipassive that are not attested in this corpus that are not covered by Hypothesis B. For example, Dixon (1972: 75) cites an example (his (133)) in which antipassive is used where the A in the antipassive clause has as antecedent in the preceding clause, not an absolute nominal, but a dative P in another antipassive clause. There is also one sentence in the texts Cooreman examined that does not conform to the literal interpretation of Hypothesis B. Namely, in this example (Cooreman's (21), p. 733), the antipassive verb bears the further suffix *-ɲura*, which indicates that the absolute of the verb so marked should be interpreted as having the ergative nominal in the preceding clause as antecedent, so the antecedent in the preceding clause is ergative not absolute. But this is exactly the function of *-ɲura*, and in an account that incorporated the function of *-ɲura*, this example would be straightforwardly handled in terms of the interaction of antipassive and *-ɲura*. David Wilkins (p.c.) reports that there are also other specialized conditions in which antipassive is either impossible or obligatory.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that there is a third hypothesis that comes closer than Hypothesis A to describing the distribution of antipassives:

Hypothesis C: Antipassive is used if and only if the A is more topical than the P.

If we assume that unspecified or nonreferential P's are necessarily less topical than referential A's, then this covers the first two uses of antipassive listed in (10). If we otherwise assume that referential distance is an accurate measure of topicality, this hypothesis predicts that antipassive will be used whenever the RD of the A is less than the RD of the P. While this covers a large number of cases, it

still fails in two situations: when both A and P have an RD of 1 and when neither A nor P have an RD of 1 but the RD of the A is less than the RD of the P.

<sup>9</sup> The last two categories in Table 2 involve clauses where there are two coreferential nominals linking the two clauses.

<sup>10</sup> In a more recent paper discussing antipassives crosslinguistically, Cooreman (1990) discusses the Dyirbal antipassive somewhat differently from her earlier paper, explicitly noting that antipassive in topic chains is used for structural rather than semantic/pragmatic reasons and proposes that this use of antipassive involves a co-opting of the construction for a function distinct from its original function.

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