

# Nepali Ergative Case Assignment

Martha Schwarz (McGill University)

## Introduction

Subjects in Nepali (Indo-Aryan) sometimes appear with an ergative case marker, *-le*. While previous accounts have attempted to describe when the case marker appears and when it does not, none have proposed an explanation for how ergative case is assigned. The primary goal of this talk is to present a puzzle: how to explain ergative case assignment given issues that arise with both inherent case theory (ICT) and dependant case theory (DCT) explanations. Since Nepali's ergativity split is not straightforward, I will first describe the split and specify which instances of *-le* case assignment will have to account for.

## Description of the split

Broadly speaking, the ergative marker *-le* is obligatory on subjects of transitive verbs in the perfective aspect (1) but not in the imperfective (2) (Bickel and Yadava 2000, Bobaljik 2008, Li 2007, Verbeke 2013), suggesting aspect based split ergativity<sup>1</sup>.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| (1) Ram- <i>le</i> patrika    kin-eko- <i>chha</i><br>Ram-ERG newspaper buy-PFV-Pres.3sg<br>'Ram has bought a newspaper.' | (2) Ram patrika    kin- <i>chha</i><br>Ram newspaper buy-Pres.3sg<br>'Ram buys a newspaper.' |
|---|--|

More specifically, *-le* is obligatory on subjects of perfective transitive verbs, ungrammatical on subjects of imperfective unaccusative verbs, and variable/optional on unergative subjects and imperfective transitive subjects. Its use on subjects in the optional domain has been attributed to the animacy of the subject (Li 2007), focalization (Hutt and Subedie 1999), and individual vs. stage level predicates (Butt and Paudel 2007). I propose that (as alluded to by Woolford, in press) Nepali involves two divisions: an initial syntactic split based on aspect, and then a system of differential subject marking within the imperfective domain. The following section pertains to the initial syntactic split.

## Inherent case or dependent case?

Inherent Case Theory: Inherent case theories propose that ergative case gets assigned along with a theta role by *v* to the subject DP in its specifier position (Laka 2006, Woolford 2008). In an ICT account thematic agents will always be marked with ergative case. However, Nepali thematic agents in imperfective sentences like in (2) do not bear ergative case.

Dependent Case Theory: The notion that ICT cannot account for (2) has led some (Baker and Bobaljik, in press) to argue that ergative case is not inherent but dependent; it only appears when there is a second NP in its domain that is already marked with the unmarked absolutive case (no overt marking in Nepali). In order for DCT to explain (2), we need an analysis where the subject and object arguments are not in the same domain. Coon and Preminger (2015) and Coon (2013) propose an analysis of aspectually split ergative languages in which the imperfective marker is analyzed as an intransitive auxiliary verb that embeds the matrix clause, causing the auxiliary verb and its (therefore intransitive) subject to fall outside of the case marking domain of the object of the verb. This works well in languages with an imperfective morpheme that appears at the edge of the verb phrase. The relevant morpheme in Nepali (*-chha*, which is also a copular verb), however, appears both in sentences with (1) and without (2) ergative marking.

## Towards a solution

Given these observations, I am working on a solution that involves two parts: a syntactic explanation for the split between sentences with obligatory ergative marking and those without by solving the problems with either an ICT or DCT approach, and an explanation of which semantic factors condition optional ergative marking.

---

<sup>1</sup>The data in these examples are from my elicitation with Padam Gharti, a native Nepali speaker

## References

- Baker, Mark, and David Bobaljik. In press. On inherent and dependent theories of ergative case. In *Handbook of Ergativity*, ed. by Jessica Coon, Diane Massam, and Lisa Travis. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bickel, Balthasar, and Yogendra Yadava. 2000. A fresh look at grammatical relations in Indo-Aryan. *Lingua* 110: 343-73.
- Bobaljik, Jonathan David. 2008. Where's Phi - Agreement as a postsyntactic operation. In Daniel Harbour, David Adger, and Susana Bejar, eds. *Phi-Theory: Phi features across interfaces and modules*, Oxford University Press, 295-328.
- Butt, Miriam, and Tikaram Poudel. 2007. Distribution of the ergative in Nepali. Ms., Konstanz.
- Coon, Jessica. 2013. TAM split ergativity (parts 1-2). *Language and Linguistics Compass* 7:171-200.
- Coon, Jessica, and Omer Preminger. 2015. Split ergativity is not about ergativity.
- Hutt, M and A. Subedie. 1999. Teach yourself Nepali. A complete course in understanding, speaking and writing Nepali. Hodder Headline.
- Laka, Itziar. 2006. Deriving split ergativity in the progressive. *Ergativity*. Springer Netherlands. 173-195.
- Li, Chao. 2007. Split ergativity and split intransitivity in Nepali. *Lingua* 117: 1462-1482.
- Verbeke, Saartje. 2013. Alignment and ergativity in New Indo-Aryan languages. *Empirical Approaches to Language Typology*. 51.
- Woolford, Ellen. In press. Split ergativity. In *Handbook of Ergativity*, ed. by Jessica Coon, Diane Massam, and Lisa Travis. Oxford: Oxford University Press.