Distribution of the Ergative in Nepali

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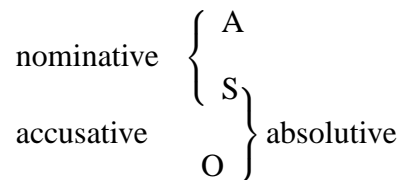
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1 Introduction

We suggest that the distribution of the ergative in Nepali must be understood in terms of primarily semantic factors. In particular, stage vs. individual level predication seems to play a role in Nepali.

1.1 Standard Conception

- The standard conception of ergativity is a primarily structural one (Dixon 1979).

- Plank (1979:4) concisely summarizes the idea as follows:

  (1) a. A grammatical pattern or process shows ergative alignment if it identifies intransitive subjects (S_i) and transitive direct objects (dO) as opposed to transitive subjects (S_t).

      b. It shows accusative alignment if it identifies S_i and S_t as opposed to dO.

- The more standard terms and grouping are shown below (e.g. Dixon 1994:9).

$$
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{nominative} & \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{A} \\[2mm] \text{S} \end{array} \right. \\[4mm]
\text{accusative} & \left. \begin{array}{l} \\ \text{O} \end{array} \right\} \text{absolute}
\end{array}
$$

A = transitive subject (Agent)
S = intransitive subject
O = transitive object

- This leads to the following type of expected case marking across languages.

(2)

Clause Type	Language Type	
	Ergative	Accusative
Transitive	Erg-Abs	Nom-Acc
Intransitive	Abs	Nom

Note: In what follows, the label *nominative* will be used rather than absolute for the unmarked (null) case marker.

1.2 Split Ergativity

- Most ergative languages are in fact *split ergative*.

- Common Splits:

    - **NP-split**: only some pronouns or NPs may display ergative patterns.

    - **Tense/Aspect**: only some tenses (usually the past or perfective) display ergative patterns.

1.3 South Asian Languages

- Many South Asian languages display ergative patterns.

- Most are split-ergative in some way, including both standard NP-splits and Tense/Aspect splits.

However, not all of the ergative phenomena fall under the standard conception of ergativity.

Ergative with Intransitives (Volitionality/Agency Alternation)

(3) a. ram   kʰãs-a
         Ram.M.Nom cough-Perf.M.Sg
         'Ram coughed.'   (Hindi/Urdu)

     b. ram=ne   kʰãs-a
         Ram.M=Erg cough-Perf.M.Sg
         'Ram coughed (purposefully).'   (Hindi/Urdu)

Dative/Ergative Modal Alternations

The ergative can appear in non-finite constructions in Lahori and Delhi dialects of Urdu/Hindi, again correlating roughly with volitionality/conscious choice (Butt and King 1991, Bashir 1999), but also expressing *modality*.

(4) a. nadya=**ne**   zu ja-na hɛ
         Nadya.F=Erg zoo go-Inf be.Pres.3.Sg
         'Nadya wants to go to the zoo.'   (Urdu)

     b. nadya=**ko**   zu ja-na hɛ
         Nadya.F=Dat zoo go-Inf be.Pres.3.Sg
         'Nadya wants/has to go to the zoo.'   (Urdu)

- Urdu/Hindi has just the above two types of exceptions to the general pattern (alternations with unergative verbs as in (3) are known to be common crosslinguistically).

- The closely related South Asian language Nepali has a much more complex pattern.

- The distribution of the ergative in Nepali has as yet not been described (or understood) fully.

- This paper sets out to describe the observed distribution and suggests explanations for at least a part of the pattern.

2 Nepali: Past vs. Non-Past

- Nepali is an Indo-Aryan language spoken in Nepal, Bhutan and in some parts of India.

- In early work, Turner (1931:560) states that the Nepali ergative marker *le* always marks the subject of a transitive verb.

- This statement is in complete accordance with the standard view on ergativity (section 1.1), but is not in accordance with the data observed today.

At a first pass, things seem unproblematic if one assumes a tense/aspect split according to past vs. non-past. The generalization is then as follows:

- Transitive ((5)) and Unergative ((6)) clauses in the past have an ergative subject.

  (5) a. mai=le   sodhpatra   lekh-y-ẽ
           Pron.1.Sg=ERG research paper write-Past-1.Sg
           'I wrote the/a research paper.'

       b. mai   sodhpatra   lekh-chu
           Pron.1.Sg research paper write-NonPast.1.Sg
           'I (will) write research papers.'

  (6) a. goru=le   mut-yo
           bull.M.3.Sg=Erg urinate-Past.M.3.Sg.
           'The bull urinated.'

       b. goru   mut-cha
           bull.M.3.Sg.Nom urinate-NonPast.M.3.Sg.
           'The bull will urinate.'

- Some Unergatives allow a Case Alternation (Erg/Nom). It looks similar to what is found in Urdu ((3)).

  (7) a. hasan=le   nac-yo
           Hassan.M=Erg dance-Past.M.3.Sg
           'Hassan danced.'

       b. hasan   nac-yo
           Hassan.M.Nom dance-Past.M.3.Sg
           'Hassan danced.'

- Unaccusatives never have an ergative subject.

   (8) hasan   ga-yo
        Hassan.M.Nom go-Past.M.3.Sg
        'Hassan went.'

  - Subjects of Non-Past Clauses will never have an ergative subject (cf. (6b)).

The last statement, however, seems not to be true at all — a quick glance at the horoscope section in any Nepali newspaper, for example, shows that quite a lot of ergative subjects show up with non-past (i.e., future) clauses.

The precise pattern in non-past clauses therefore needs to be examined carefully.

A close look at the available data in a corpus reveals that the uses of an ergative subject in **non-past clauses** seems to correlate mainly with:

1. Stage vs. Individual Level Predication (section 3).

2. Instrument/Reason (section 4)

Note: In what follows, we set aside the further problem of dialectal variation. Most of the data is culled from written texts (corpus developed by Poudel).

3   Stage vs. Individual Level Predication

When questioned about the semantic difference between minimal pairs as in (9), native speakers of Nepali tend to look at you quite helplessly — a difference is felt, but what that difference is cannot usually be articulated.

   (9) a. hasan=le   gaaṛi   chalaun-cha
            Hassan=Erg car.Nom drive-NonPast.3.Sg
            'Hassan drives cars.'

        b. hasan   gaaṛi   chalaun-cha
            Hassan.Nom car.Nom drive-NonPast.3.Sg
            'Hassan drives cars.'

We suggest that the difference lies in individual- vs. stage-level predication.[2]

Earlier studies have clearly established that stage ((10)) vs. individual ((11)) level predication is a crosslinguistic reality (Kratzer 1995, Chierchia 1995, Ogawa 2001, Jaeger 2004).

Stage-Level Predication: Says something about a property of a referent that holds for a slice of that referents spatio-temporal existence.

 (10) Carla has a cold.

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[2]Thanks go to Gillian Ramchand for first suggesting this analysis to us.

Individual-Level Predication: Predicates a lasting/inherent property of a referent.

(11) Carla has red hair./Carla is a doctor.

3.1   Copulas

In some languages, two different versions of the verb for 'be' express the difference (e.g., Ramchand 1997 for Scottish Gaelic).

(12) a. **is**   dotair calum
        Cop.Pres doctor Calum
        'Calum is a doctor.'   (Scottish Gaelic, Individual-Level)

    b. **tha**   calum anns a'gharradh
        be.Pres Calum in   garden
        'Calum is in the garden.'   (Scottish Gaelic, Stage-Level)

In Nepali:

- The copula *ho* expresses individual-level predication.

- The copula *cha* expresses stage-level predication.

- No distinction is made in the past tense (*thyo*).

Simple Minimal Pair

(13) saru bhakta kabi **hun**
      Saru Bhakta poet be.NonPast.3.M.Hon
      'Saru Bhakta is a poet.'   (Individual-Level)

(14) saru bhakta aaja   khusi **chan**
      Saru Bhakta today happy be.NonPast.3.M.Hon
      'Saru Bhakta is happy today.'   (Stage-Level)

Further Evidence: The Spatial Adverb Test

Stage-level predicates are compatible with spatial adverbial phrases because the adverbials designate a slice of spatio-temporal existence.

Individual-level predicates are not compatible with such adverbial phrases.

(15) a. kaathmaandu=maa mero ghar   **cha**
        Kathmandu=Loc   my   house be.NonPast.M.3.Sg
        'My house/home is in Kathmandu.'   (Stage-Level)

    b. *kaathmaandu=maa mero ghar   **ho**
         Kathmandu=Loc   my   house be.NonPast.M.3.Sg
         'My house/home is in Kathmandu.'   (Individual-Level)

3.2   General Ergative Distribution in the Non-Past

- In non-copula clauses the copula is not available to make the distinction between individual- and stage-level predication.

- **Hypothesis:**

    – the ergative in non-past sentences is correlated with individual-level predication.

    – the unmarked case (nominative) is correlated with stage-level predication.

(16)　a.　raam=le　(#aajaa) angreji jaan-da-cha
　　　　　Ram=Erg today　 English know-Impf-NonPast.M.3.Sg
　　　　　'Ram knows English (#today).'　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Individual-Level)

　　　b.　raam (aajaa) angreji bol-da-cha
　　　　　Ram today   English speak-Impf-NonPast.M.3.Sg
　　　　　'Ram will speak English (today).'　　　　　　　　　　　　(Stage-Level)

3.2.1   Testing the Idea: *When*-clauses

Kratzer (1995) argues that transitive *when*-conditionals need to have at least one of their arguments be non-specific in individual-level predication.

Both Arguments Specific (*Pallawi, English*)

(17)　a.　*jaba   pallawi angreji jaan-da-che
　　　　　　when Pallawi English know-Impf-NonPast.F.3.Sg

　　　　　　u　　　 yo ramrari jaan-da-che
　　　　　　Pron.3.Sg this fluently know-Impf-NonPast.F.3.Sg
　　　　　　'When Pallawi knows English, she knows it well.　　　(Individual-Level)

　　　b.　jaba   pallawi angreji bol-da-che
　　　　　when Pallawi English know-Impf-NonPast.F.3.Sg

　　　　　u　　　　 yo ramrari bol-da-che
　　　　　Pron.3.Sg this fluently know-Impf-NonPast.F.3.Sg
　　　　　'When Pallawi speaks English, she speaks it well.　　　(Stage-Level)

One Argument Non-Specific (*Nepalese*)

(18)　jaba   nepali=le   angreji jaan-da-chan
　　　when Nepali=Erg English know-Impf-NonPast.3.Pl

　　　uni-haru　　 yo ramrari jaan-da-chan
　　　Pron.3.Sg-Pl this fluently know-Impf-NonPast.3.Pl
　　　'When Nepalese know English, they know it well.　　　　　(Individual-Level)

3.2.2 Presupposition vs. Assertion of Existence

More precisely, we here follow Kearns' (2001:22) proposals:

- individual-level predication correlates with Ladusaw's (1994) categorical propositions
    - an entity is presented for attention and a property is attributed to it
    - this entails a *presuppositional* interpretation ((19a))
- stage-level predication correlates with Ladusaw's (1994) thetic proposition.
    - a state of affairs is presented all at once
    - this correlates with an *existential* assertion ((19b))

(19) a. pradhan mantri=le pul=ko   udghaaṭan   gar-chan
         prime minister=Erg bridge=Gen inauguration do-NonPast.3.Pl
         'Prime ministers inaugurate bridges.'   (Individual-level Presupposition)

   b. pradhan mantri pul=ko   udghaaṭan   gar-chan
         prime minister bridge=Gen inauguration do-NonPast.3.M.Hon
         'The prime minister is inaugurating/will inaugurate the bridge.'   (Stage-level Assertion
         of Existence)

Kind referring NPs presuppose typical activites, so the ergative is used when the presupposition is fulfilled ((20a)). Otherwise a stage-level property is asserted ((20b)).

(20) a. caalak=le gaaṛi   calaau-cha
         driver=Erg vehicle drive-NonPast.M.3.Sg
         'The driver drives the vehicles.'

   b. guru   gaaṛi   calaau-cha
         teacher vehicle drive-NonPast.M.3.Sg
         'The teacher is driving/will drive the vehicle.'

Sample Context I

Consider a context in which Jivan is the physics teacher at a school. If students are asked who teaches them physics generally, the answer will be in terms of individual-level predication: with the ergative in (21a) or the *ho* copula in (21b).

(21) a. jivan sir=**le**   paṛhaau-nu hun-cha
         Jivan sir=Erg teach-Inf   be-NonPast.3.Hon
         'Jivan sir teaches (us physics).'

   b. jivan sir physics=kaa   sikshak **hun**
         Jivan sir physics=Gen.Hon teacher be.NonPast.3.Hon
         'Jivan sir is (our) teacher of physics.'

In contrast, if Jivan is sick and one asks who will temporarily teach the students physics, the examples in (22) would be the stage-level answer.

(22) pramesh sir paṛhaau-nu hun-cha
     Pramesh sir teach-Inf   be-NonPast.3.Hon
     'Pramesh sir will teach (us).'

Sample Context II

Consider a situation in which Saru Bhakta is a well-known poet, but not Numaraj, who is a well-known teacher. Then the following sentences are appropriate.

(23) a. saru bhakta=le   kabitaa lekh-chan
        Saru Bhakta=Erg poems   write-NonPast.M.Hon.3.
        'Saru Bhakta writes poems.'   (Erg = Individual-Level)

      b. numaraj kabitaa lekh-chan
        Numaraj poems   write-NonPast.M.Hon.3.Sg
        'Numaraj writes poems (not regularly).'   (no Erg = Stage-Level)

      c. numaraj=le paṛhaau-chan
        Numaraj   teach-NonPast.M.Hon.3.
        'Numaraj teaches.'   (Erg = Individual-Level)

3.2.3   Generics/Kinds (Carlson 1977)

- Kind/generic NPs are prototypical default arguments of individual-level predicates.

- Kind/generic NPs in English can be expressed by bare plurals ((24)) or by definite NPs ((25)).

   (24) Bears are dangerous.

   (25) The panda is dying out.

In Nepali, as would be expected, kind/generic NPs are marked by the ergative.

(26) raauṭe=le jangle=ko kandamul   khaa-(n)chan
     Raute=Erg forest=Gen wild edibles eat-NonPast.3.Pl
     'The Rautes eat the wild edibles of the forest.'

(27) kukur=le maasu khaan-cha
     dog=Erg meat   eat-NonPast.3.Sg.M
     'The dog eats meat(≡Dogs eat meat).'

3.2.4   Other Tenses/Aspects

The generalization in terms of individual-level vs. stage-level predication holds for all non-past tenses.

In the past tense, the distinction collapses, as the past tense renders everything into a stage-level predication.

(28) a. Carla had red hair.   (Stage-Level, but individual in present tense)

     b. Carla had a cold.   (Stage-Level)

(29) a. bu   dotair calum
      Cop.Past doctor Calum
      'Calum was a doctor (but now he is dead).'   (Scottish Gaelic, Stage-Level)

     b. is   dotair calum
      Cop.Pres doctor Calum
      'Calum is a doctor.'   (Scottish Gaelic, Individual-Level)

This point is further illustrated with respect to habituals.

3.2.5   Habituals

- Standard grammars in Nepali have tended to invoke the notion of *habituality* in order to explain the distribution of ergative =*le*.

- However, habituals should not be confused with individual-level predication — a habit is not necessarily a defining, lasting, individual-stage property.

- The examples in (30) make statements about habits that have ceased to exist — as expected, no ergative appears with these examples in Nepali.

(30) a. tyas belaa raam   iskul jaan-th-yo
      at that time Ram.Nom school go-Hab-Past.3.M.Sg
      'At that time Ram used to go to school.'

     b. tyas belaa raam   khub padh-th-yo
      at that time Ram.Nom much read-Hab-Past.3.M.Sg
      'At that time Ram used to study hard.'

     c. ramesh   dindinai nuhaau–th-yo
      Ramesh.Nom every day bathe-Hab-Past.3.M.Sg
      'Ramesh used to bathe every day.'

     d. pahiro   laṛ-th-yo
      landslide fall-Hab-Past.3.M.Sg
      'There used to be a landslide.'

4 Instrumentals and Reason Clauses

A further complication: in Nepali the ergative and instrumental markers are form-identical.

(31) mai=le   kalam=**le** lekh-y-ẽ
     1.Sg=Erg pen=Inst write-Past-1.Sg
     'I wrote with the pen.'

- In (32) the ergative/instrumental is used to mark a "reason clause" — the coming of the guests is the **cause**/reason for not going to the wedding.

  (32) [paahunaa aau-naa]=le   ma   timro bihaa=maa   jaa-na paa-i-na
         guests   come-Inf=Erg/Inst Pron.1.Sg your   wedding=Loc go-Inf get-Perf.1.Sg-Neg
         'Because of guests' coming, I could not go to your wedding.'

- The notion of **cause** is semantically very close to that of agency, for which the ergative is apt to be employed crosslinguistically.

- So this example makes sense on semantic grounds as well.

5 Non-finite Contexts

5.1 Participial *-eko*

Another construction in which *le* is found is in connection with the past participle *-eko*.

(33) mai=le   miṭhaai khaa-eko   dekh-era
     Pron.1.Sg=Inst/Erg sweet   eat-PastPart see-Conj

     u   has-yo
     Pron.3.Sg laugh-Past.3.Sg.M
     'He laughed, seeing me eat sweets (lit. seeing the sweets eaten by me).'

(34) [cor=le   cor-eko]   dasi   phelaa par-yo
     thief=Inst/Erg steal-PastPart article trace   fall-Past.M.3.Sg
     'The article stolen by the thief has been traced.'

We suggest that the *le* form should in fact be analyzed as an instrumental adjunct within the participial phrase.

5.2 Verbal Nouns/Infinitives

- Nepali uses several infinitive forms in several differing contexts.

- We need to explore this further.

- Some constructions involve the ergative/instrumental *le* marker.

5.2.1   Expression of Modality

(35a) shows a construction in which the verb 'fall' acts as a modal/future marker.

When an ergative is added, the existing deontic modality is strengthened: the implication is that there will be dire consequences if the subject does not go to the office.

(35) a. ma   aṛṛaa jaa-nu par-cha
          Pron.1.Sg office go-Inf fall-NonPast.3.Sg
          'I will have to go to the office.'

      b. mai=le   aṛṛaa jaa-nu par-cha
          Pron.1.Sg=Erg office go-Inf fall-NonPast.3.Sg
          'I must absolutely go to the office.'

- This example is reminiscent of (but not parallel to) the Urdu example in (4).

- Generally, the expression of modality seems to be helped along by means of case marking in South Asian languages.

  (36) a. **ami**   tomake cai
            I.Nom you.Acc wants
            'I want you.' (Klaiman 1980:279)   Bengali

        b. **amar** tomake   cai
            I.Gen you.Acc wants
            'I need you.' (Klaiman 1980:279)   Bengali

  (37) a. **amma**   kuṭṭiye   aḍik'k'-aṇam
            mother.Nom child.Acc beat-want
            'Mother must beat the child.'   Malayalam
            (Butt, King and Varghese 2004)

        b. **ammak'k'ə** kuṭṭiye   aḍik'k'-aṇam
            mother.Dat   child.Acc beat-want
            'Mother wants to beat the child.'   Malayalam
            (Butt, King and Varghese 2004)

This needs to be examined further.

5.2.2   Other Constructions

The use of *le* in (38) is probably a straight-forward instrumental in an embedded infinitival clause, in parallel to what was proposed for the *-eko* participials.

(38) bidyaarthi=le paṛh-ne kitaab
      student=Inst   read-Pot book
      'Books to be read by students.'

6   Conclusion

- The distribution of the ergative in Nepali follows a tense/aspect split insofar as that the past forms **always** require an ergative for agentive transitives.

- With respect to the non-past clauses, no systematic explanation of the appearance of the ergative has previously been offered.

- We argued that a great deal of the pattern can be explained with reference to the notions of stage-level vs. individual level predication.

- This distribution of the ergative in Nepali is (as far as we know) typologically unexpected.

- The use of the ergative in modal contexts is also typologically unexpected, but has been observed previously for Urdu — a detailed understanding of the connection between modality and case remains to be worked out.

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