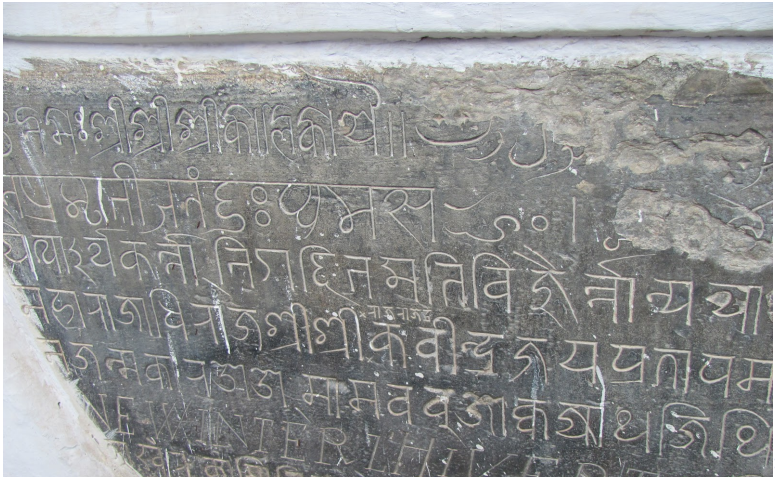


# Nepali Case and Topicality

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## Nepali Case and Topicality



## Agreement Patterns

- Many Indo-Aryan languages display split-ergative syntax
- Imperfective tenses (present, habitual):  
**nominative-accusative** pattern
- Perfective tenses (perfective past, perfective auxiliaries):  
**ergative-absolutive** pattern
- We can see this pattern as it occurs in Hindi (examples from Deo and Sharma 2006:376)

## Agreement Patterns: Hindi

- (1) **sita**      **rām-ko**      **dekh-t-ī**      **h-ai**  
sita.F.NOM ram.M-ACC see-IMPV-F.SG be-PRES.3.SG  
'Sita sees Ram.'
- (2) **rām-ne**      **cidiyā**      **dekh-ī**  
ram.M-ERG bird.F.NOM see-PERF.F.SG  
'Ram saw a sparrow.'
- (3) **rām-ne**      **radha-ko**      **dekh-ā**  
ram.M-ERG radha.F-ACC see-PERF.3.M.SG  
'Sita saw Radha.'

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'Sita saw Radha.'

## Agreement Patterns: Nepali

- (4) **rām-le**      **cidi-haru**                      **dekh-yo**  
ram.M-ERG sparrow.NOM-PL see-PERF.3.SG  
'Ram saw sparrows.'
- (5) **rām-le**      **sita-lāi**      **dekh-yo**  
ram.M-ERG sita-ACC see-PERF.3.SG  
'Ram saw Sita.'
- (6) **sita-(le)**                      **rām-lāi**      **dekh-chin**  
sita.F.NOM-(ERG) ram-ACC see-PRES.F.3.SG  
'Sita sees Ram.'

## The Puzzle

- This pattern is completely unique to Nepali. The postposition *-le* is **obligatory** in the perfective domain and **“optional”** elsewhere.
- There have been various proposals to explain this variation, but nobody has yet been able to precisely characterize the conditions that lead to differential marking.

# Presentation Outline

- 1 Theory
- 2 Historical Background
- 3 Conclusions



# Theory

Theory

## The Puzzle

- (7) a. ma curoṭ khān-chu  
I cigarette eat-PRES.3.SG  
'I smoke cigarettes.' (I have a habit.)
- b. mai-le curoṭ khān-chu  
I.OBL-ERG cigarette eat-PRES.3.SG  
'I smoke cigarettes.' (I am a *curoṭ khāne mānche*  
'cigarette-smoking person.')

## Previous Arguments

- Emphasis (Grierson, Clark, Masica)
- Disambiguation (Abadie)
- Differential Subject Marking (Li, Bickel)
- Individual-Level Predication (Butt and Poudel)

## Previous Arguments: Individual-Level Predication

- Butt and Poudel 2008: *-le* distinguishes a habitual from an ongoing reading of the simple present:

(8) a. *cālak-le gāḍi calāu-cha*  
driver-ERG car drive-PRES.3.SG

‘The driver drives the vehicles.’

b. *guru gāḍi calāu-cha*  
teacher car drive-PRES.3.SG

‘The teacher is driving/will drive the vehicle.’

## Individual-Level Predication: Problems

- Unfortunately, a habitual reading is possible without *-le*:

(9) rām taxi chil-aaun-cha  
ram taxi drive-CAUSE-PRES.3.SG  
'Ram drives a taxi.'

- More importantly, *-le* is possible in ongoing readings like the progressive:

(10) bahira tyo manche-le mithai bec-dai-cha  
outside that person-ERG candy sell-CONT-PRES.3.SG  
'That person is selling candy outside.'

## Proposal: Topic Marker

- *-le* is a *Topic Marker*, marking the subject of a **categorical proposition**
- I follow Kuroda's (1972, 1990) analysis of Japanese *wa* topic marking.
- Thetic Proposition: A statement about a state of affairs, with no argument given prominence.
- Categorical Proposition: A subject is first presented, and then a property is predicated of it.

## Proposal: Categorical Propositions

- “*The speaker’s interest is primarily directed towards this entity, and the happening of the event referred to is precisely that he wants to relate the occurrence of the event to this entity*”(Kuroda 1972:164)
- A similar implication for *mai-le curoṭ khānchu*: “As for me, I smoke cigarettes.” We are presenting an entity, and then we are predicating a property of that entity. Thus, I am a cigarette-smoking individual.

## Evidence from Discourse Context

Context: I hear a loud bang. I notice my friend looking out the window and out into the woods.



## Evidence from Discourse Context

- (11) What is happening outside? (*Bahira ke hundaicha?*)  
a. shikāri-(le) mrigā samāt-dai-cha  
hunter-(ERG) deer catch-CONT-PRES.3.SG  
'The/A hunter is hunting a deer.'
- (12) What is that hunter doing? (*Shikāri-le ke gardaicha?*)  
a. shikāri-#(le) mrigā samāt-dai-cha  
hunter-#(ERG) deer catch-CONT-PRES.3.SG  
'The hunter is hunting a deer.'

## Evidence from Discourse Context

- If the referent of “hunter” is not presupposed in the discourse, then it cannot be marked with *-le*.
- In response to thethetic question, *-le* is optional. We may choose to answer the question as athetic proposition or as a categorical proposition. But the categorical question must be answered with *-le* (categorically).

# Historical Background

## Historical Background

## Appearance of *-le*

- Poudel 2008: earliest attestations of Nepali had no agent case markers (ca. 1250)

(13) sutradhar nāmdev nām kam-ā-yo  
artist Namdev name engrave-CAUS-PERF.3.SG  
'Namdev, the artist, engraved the name.'

- First usage of *-le* in 14th century CE:

(14) bahun-**le** pā-yo khet  
Brahmin-ERG receive-PERF.3.SG paddy.field  
'The Brahmin received the paddy field.' (1389)

## Extension of *-le*

- Wallace 1982: The extension of *-le* out of the perfective began in the 18th century CE:

(15) kyān bhan-aulā vāhiḍā mānchyā-**le** darvār-mā  
why say-FUT.2.PL outside person-ERG palace-LOC  
vithiti gar-āũ-chan  
treachery do-CAUS-PRES.3.PL

‘Why do you say that foreigners will cause disorder in the palace?’ (1775)

## Language Influence

- Many linguists have attributed this extension to Tibeto-Burman influence (Grierson 1904, Clark 1963, Masica 1991)
- Many Tibeto-Burman languages have subject marking in all tenses (and Nepali-like agreement patterns)
- Verbeke 2011 notes that *Kathmandu* Nepal Bhasha varieties have obligatory marking in the perfective tenses and optional marking in the imperfective (like Nepali) while it is obligatory in all tenses for *Dolakha* Nepal Bhasha varieties.
- It is difficult to say whether Nepal Bhasha influenced Nepali or vice versa

## Does (Patan) Nepal Bhasha show the same discourse pattern?

- Q: *Kas-le khānā pak-āun-dai cha?* Who is cooking food?  
A: **NEPALI:** *hāmi-le khānā pak-āun-dai chu* We are cooking food.  
A: **NEWARI:** *jimsā jā thuya tswanu* We are cooking food.
- Q: *Ke khānā pak-āun-dai chau?* What food are you cooking?  
A: **NEPALI:** *hāmi baji pak-āun-dai chu* We are cooking beaten rice.  
A: **NEWARI:** *jipĩ bai thuya tswanu* We are cooking beaten rice.

# Conclusions

Conclusions



# Conclusions

- The extended usage of *-le* in imperfective tenses is best characterized as a topic marker
- Modern (Patan) Nepal Bhasha shows a similar pattern
- Parallel Grammatical development

## Remaining Questions

- Ongoing research into a precise pragmatic/semantic description of *-le*
- Interaction with copula system
- Does the loss of agentive marking in KTM Nepal Bhasha coincide chronologically with the extension of *-le* in Nepali?
- Influence from other languages

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**Acknowledgments**  
Additional Data

Thank You!



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## Quantificational Determiners with overt NPs

Context: I own ten cats, and I need my friend to feed them while I'm on vacation. I am giving instructions about their various dietary restrictions.

## Quantificational Determiners with overt NPs

- (16) dheraijaso biralo-#(le) māca khān-cha  
many cat-#(ERG) fish eat-PRES.3.SG  
'Many of the cats eat fish.'
- (17) kohi.kohi biralo-#(le) māca khān-cha  
some.RED cat-#(ERG) fish eat-PRES.3.SG  
'Some of the cats eat fish.'
- (18) sabai biralo-#(le) māca khān-cha  
all cat fish eat-#(ERG)-PRES.3.SG  
'All of the cats eat fish.'
- (19) dherai biralo-(le) māca khān-cha  
many cat-(ERG) fish eat-PRES.3.SG  
'Many cats eat fish.' (A general statement about cats)

## Quantificational Determiners

- (20) kohi.kohi/sabai-#(le) māca khān-cha  
some.RED/ALL-#(ERG) fish eat-PRES.3.SG  
'Some/all (of the cats) eat fish.'
- (21) dheraijaso-\*(le) māca khān-cha  
many-\*(ERG) fish eat-PRES.3.SG  
'Many (of the cats) eat fish.'
- (22) dherai māca khān-cha  
many fish eat-PRES.3.SG  
'(Cats) eat a lot of fish.'

# Quantificational Determiners

- Strong (proportional) readings of a quantifier are marked with *-le*
- Unambiguously strong quantifiers must be marked with *-le*

## A Problematic Case: Disambiguation

- (23) a. A: I just dropped a piece of bread in the street. Let me pick it up.  
B: Don't worry about it.  
A: Why?  
B:  
carā-#(le) khaan-cha  
bird-#(ERG) eat-PRES.3.SG  
'A bird will eat it.'

## A Problematic Case: Disambiguation

- This is reminiscent of Abadie's Disambiguation Hypothesis.
- Without *-le*, speakers assume that "bird" is the object of the sentence.
- Here "bird" cannot be presupposed in the discourse. We are talking about an indefinite bird.
- Hence it is unclear how this could be the subject of a categorical proposition.
- This needs to be investigated further.

(24) **rām-le**      sita-lāi    **dekh-yo**  
ram.M-ERG sita-ACC see-PERF.3.SG  
'Ram saw Sita.'

(25) **sita-(le)**                      rām-lāi    **dekh-chin**