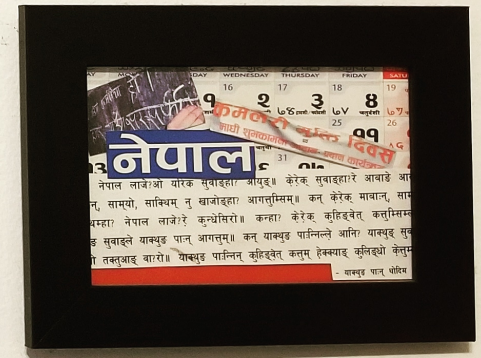
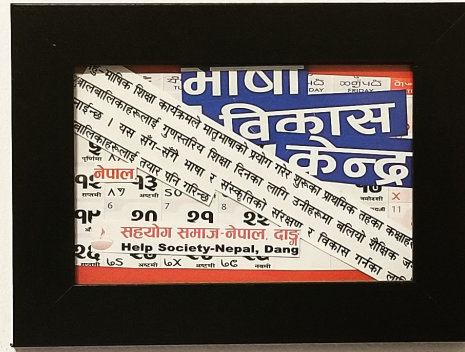
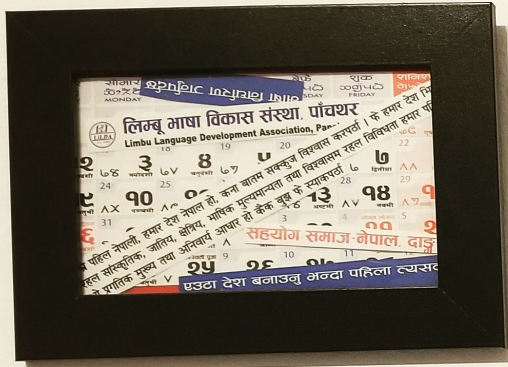


# Variable Ergativity in Nepali

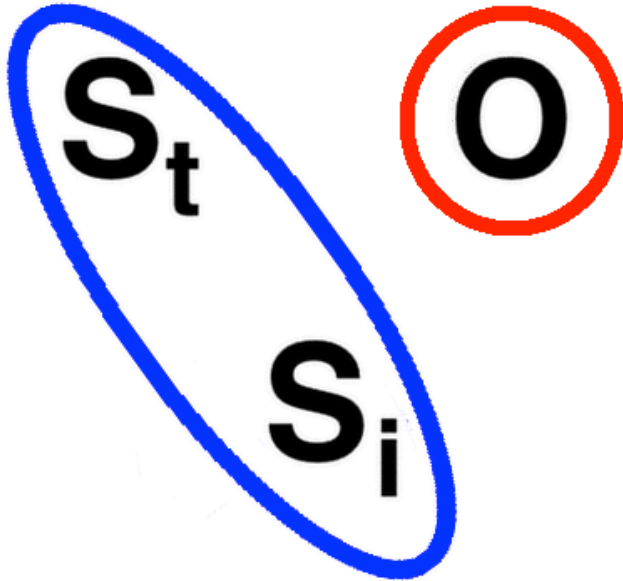


Luke Lindemann  
Yale University

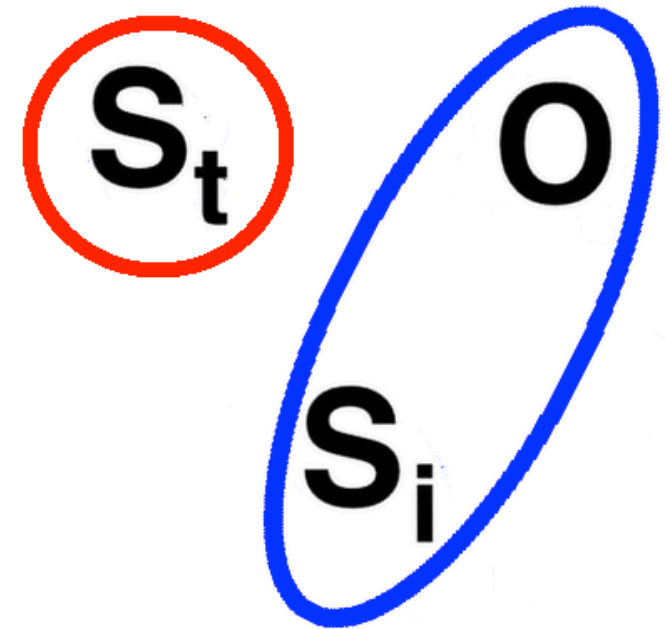
February 28, 2019

# Ergative Alignment

**Nominative - Accusative**



**Ergative - Absolutive**



**Morphologically Marked, Morphologically Unmarked (Typically)**

Adapted from Dixon (1994)

# Split-Ergativity in Hindi (Simplified)

Ergative-accusative split conditioned by Perfective Aspect:

sītā                      rām-ko                      dekh-tī hai  
Sita.F.NOM              Ram-ACC                      see-IMPF.PRES.3.SG.F  
`Sita sees Ram.' (Deo and Sharma 2006: 376)

rām-ne                      cidiyā                      dekh-ī  
Ram.M-ERG              sparrow.F.ABS                      see-PERF.SG.F  
`Ram saw a sparrow.' (Deo and Sharma 2006: 376)

# Case Marking with a Perfective Split

	Transitive ( $S_t$ )	Intransitive ( $S_i$ )
Imperfective	<b>Nominative</b>	<b>Nominative (Absolutive)</b>
Perfective	<b>Ergative</b>	

# Split-Ergativity in Nepali

Ergative-accusative split conditioned by Perfective Aspect:

sitā-(le)

Sita.F-(ERG)

`Sita sees Ram.' [SB]

rām-lāi

Ram-ACC

dekh-chin

see-PRES.3.SG.F

Rām-le

Ram.M-ERG

`Ram saw a sparrow.' [SB]

carā

sparrow

dekh-yo

see-PERF.3.SG

# Nepali Case Marking

	Transitive	Intransitive	
Imperfective	<b>ERG~NOM</b> (Variable)	<b>Unergative</b>	<b>Unaccusative</b> <b>NOM</b> (Disallowed)
Perfective	<b>ERG</b> (Obligatory)		<b>NOM</b> (Disallowed)

# Variable Ergative Marking in Nepali

- Optional Ergative Marking (OEM): the presence or absence of ergative marking does not affect the grammaticality of a particular clause
- “Optionality” indicates that marking is correlated with various pragmatic and semantic features
- Notoriously tricky to pin down (Holisky 1987, Butt and Poudel 2007, DeLancey 2011)

# Overarching Questions:

- What semantic and pragmatic features correlate with ERG/NOM case realization in Nepali?
- Is it possible to unify these features under an overall generalization about argument realization?
- How does this analysis bear on ergative patterning in other languages, and to optional case marking patterns in general?



# The Plan for Today

## 1. Methodologies

### 1. Overview of Previous Analyses

### 1. Limitations

- a. (ERG) Case Study 1: Animacy Interaction
- b. (ERG) Case Study 2: Volitionality/Control

## 2. The Contribution of *-le*

# Methodologies

- Four converging Lines of Inquiry
  - Literature
  - Elicitation with Native Speakers
  - 2016 Kathmandu Survey
  - NNSP Corpus Sample Analysis

# Selected Literature

- English Grammars
  - Grierson (1904), Turnbull (1923), Clark (1963), Acharya (1991), Schmidt (1993), Matthews (1998), Hutt and Subedi (1999)
- Nepali Grammars
  - Pradhān (1944)
- Linguistic Descriptions of Nepali Ergativity
  - Abadie (1974), Verma (1976), Pokharel (1998), Butt and Poudel (2007), Li (2007), Poudel (2008), Verbeke (2011), Verbeke and De Cuypere (2015)
- Theories of Subject Marking
  - Hopper and Thompson (1980), Du Bois (1987), Dowty (1991), Aissen (2003), Næss (2004), Deo and Sharma (2006), McGregor (2010), Croft (2012)

# Elicitation

- I worked with thirteen Nepali speakers from 2013-2019
  - 4 female, 9 male; 9 from KTM Valley
- General Elicitation Procedure:
  1. Evoke a discourse context
  2. (Agree on wording of a particular question)
  3. Ask for a response; Nominative or Ergative given?
  4. Ask whether the alternative is possible, and whether this has an effect on the discourse

# Kathmandu Survey 2016

- **Grammaticality Judgment Survey**
  - Question-Response Pairs; Two responses differentiated by NOM/ERG subject
  - **Likert Scale judgments** 1-5 for each
  - Respondents: 28 graduate students and professors at Tribhuvan University in Kirtipur
  - Examining: Inanimate Subjects, Individual-Level Predicates, Elided Objects, Intransitive Clauses, Copulas, Generic Statements, Categorical Propositions

# NNSP Corpus Analysis

- **Nepali National Spoken Corpus (NNSP):**
  - Produced in 2006 by Nelralec (Yadava et al 2008)
  - 115 recordings in natural settings (31 hours)
  - Transcribed but not annotated
- I annotated 4 interviews
  - Topics: Bargaining for clothes, workplace conversation, orthographic conventions, wildlife
  - 67 minutes, 13 speakers, 2845 total clauses
  - Verb Valence, Verb Tense, Verb Construction, Subject Case, Subject Type (Pronoun, Animacy), Object Case, Object Type (Pronoun, Animacy), Other Arguments (Datives, Instrumentals)

# Overview of Previous Analyses

## Ergative Marking and the Event

- **Perfectivity** (Masica 1993, Li 2007, etc.)
- **Telicity:**
  - in Unergative Intransitives (Li 2007)
  - in Imperfective Clauses (Verbeke 2015)
- **Individual-Level Predication** (Butt and Poudel 2007, Poudel 2008)

# Overview of Previous Analyses

## Ergative Marking and the Subject ( $S_i$ or $S_t$ )

- **Inanimate Reference** (Pokharel 1998, Li 2007, Verbeke and De Cuypere 2015)
- **Animacy in Common Nouns** (Pokharel 1998)
- **Honorificity** (Verbeke and De Cuypere 2015)
- **Agency/Volitionality** (Verma 1976, Ahearn 2001)
- **Strong Construal of Quantifiers** (Lindemann 2016)



# Overview of Previous Analyses

## Ergative Marking and the Object (O)

- **Object Elision** (Disambiguation Analysis; Abadie 1974)

# Overview of Previous Analyses

## Ergative Marking and the Discourse

- **“Emphasis”** (Grierson 1904, Clark 1963, Masica 1993)
- **Focus** (Bickel 2011)
- **Topicality / Categorical Subjecthood** (Lindemann 2016)
- **Discourse Prominence** (McGregor 2010 for OEM)

# Overview of Previous Analysis

- Most of these correlations are also found in other ergative languages
  - Related to a general Transitivity Prototype (Hopper and Thompson 1980)
  - Or a Subject Prototype (Dowty 1991, Næss 2004, Fauconnier 2011)

# Limitations of Previous Analysis

- Explanations can generally be reduced to a feature correlation
  - Ergative Case ~ Inanimate Reference
  - Ergative Case ~ Individual-Level Predicates
  - Ergative Case ~ Volitionality

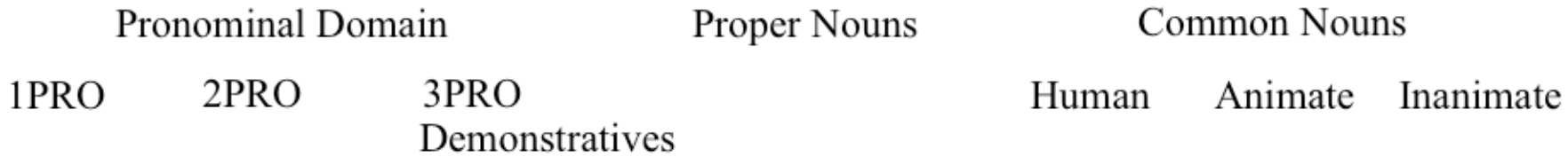
# Limitations of Previous Analysis

- However, these feature correlations are:
  - Limited to a particular grammatical domain, e.g.
    - Imperfective transitive clauses
    - Unergative intransitive clauses
  - Not categorical
    - Neither necessary nor sufficient to predict ergative marking
    - Usage of the ergative never entails a particular feature

# Case Study 1: Animacy

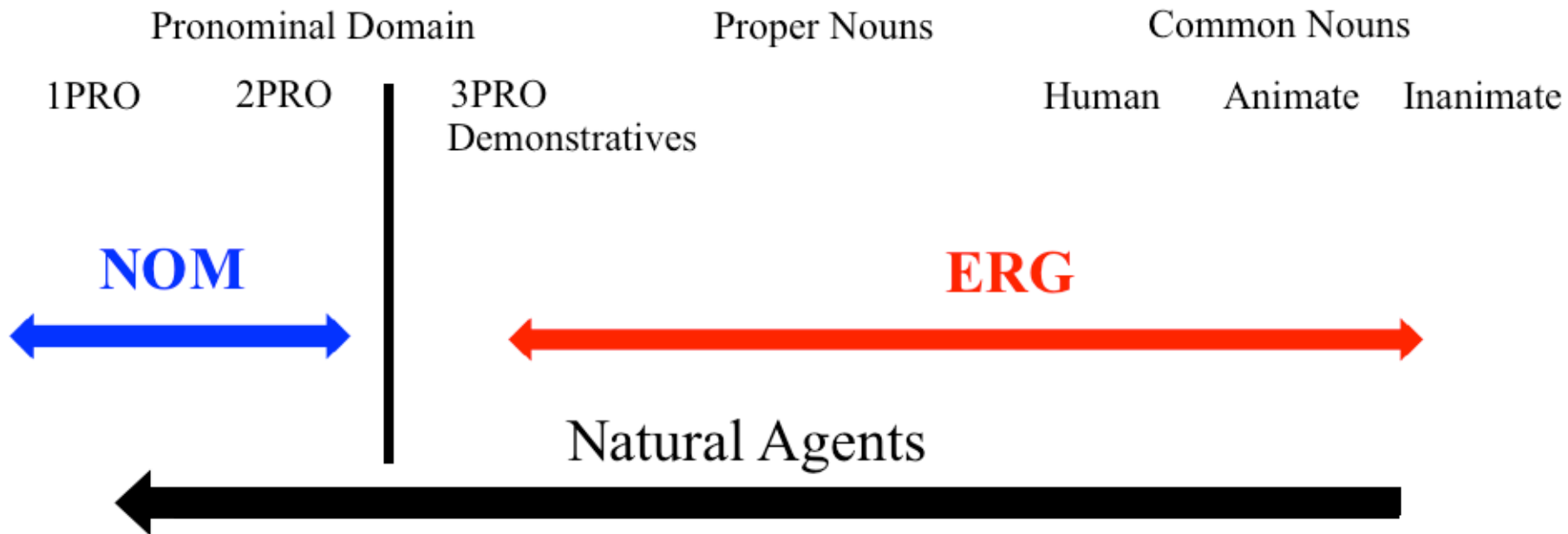
- Pokharel (1998) and Li (2007): If the subject has **inanimate reference**, ergative marking is **obligatory**
- This type of ERG/NOM split is predicted by the Nominal Hierarchy (though it is typologically unusual):

# Case Study 1: Animacy



Silverstein (1976); Dixon (1994)

# Case Study 1: Animacy

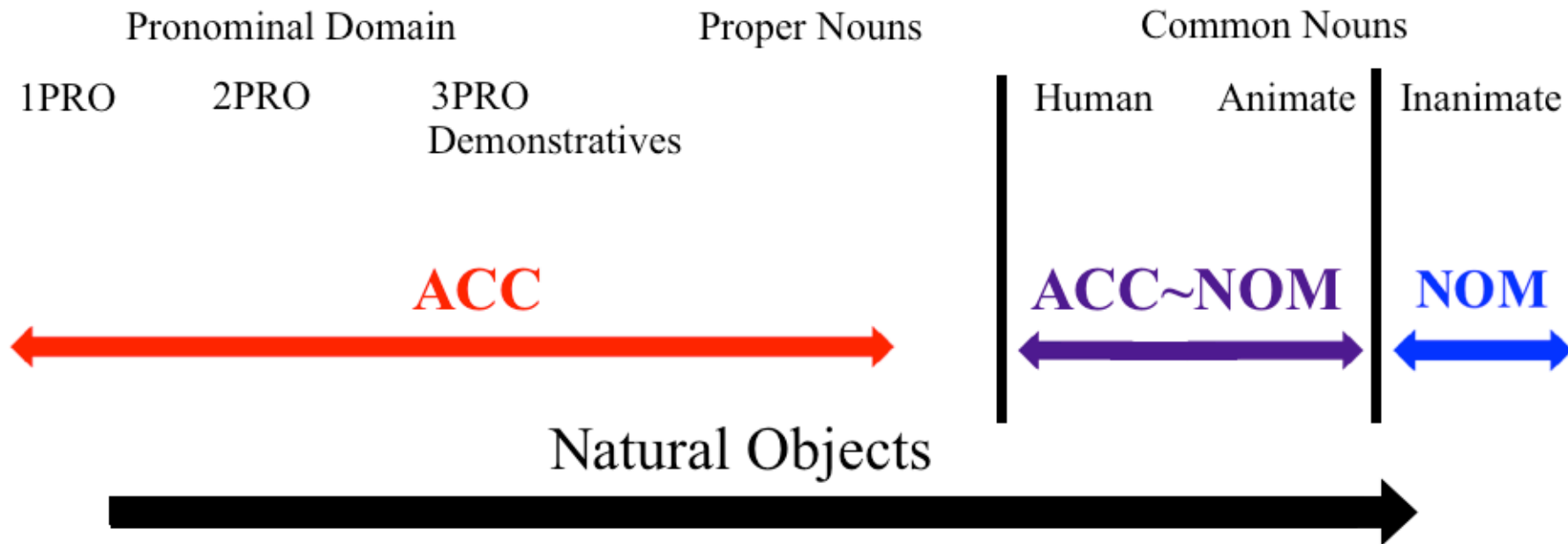


Marathi Ergative Marking (Simplified)

Silverstein (1976); Dixon (1994)



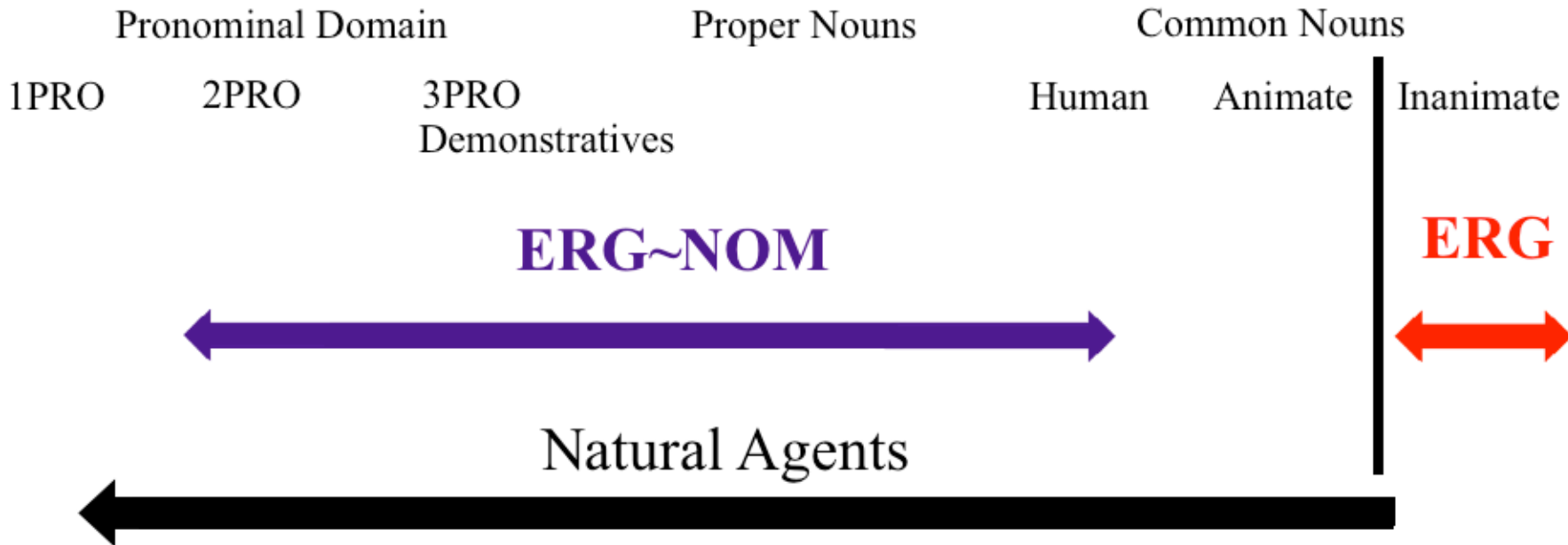
# Case Study 1: Animacy



## Hindi Accusative Marking

Silverstein (1976); Dixon (1994)

# Case Study 1: Animacy



Nepali Ergative Marking (Proposed)

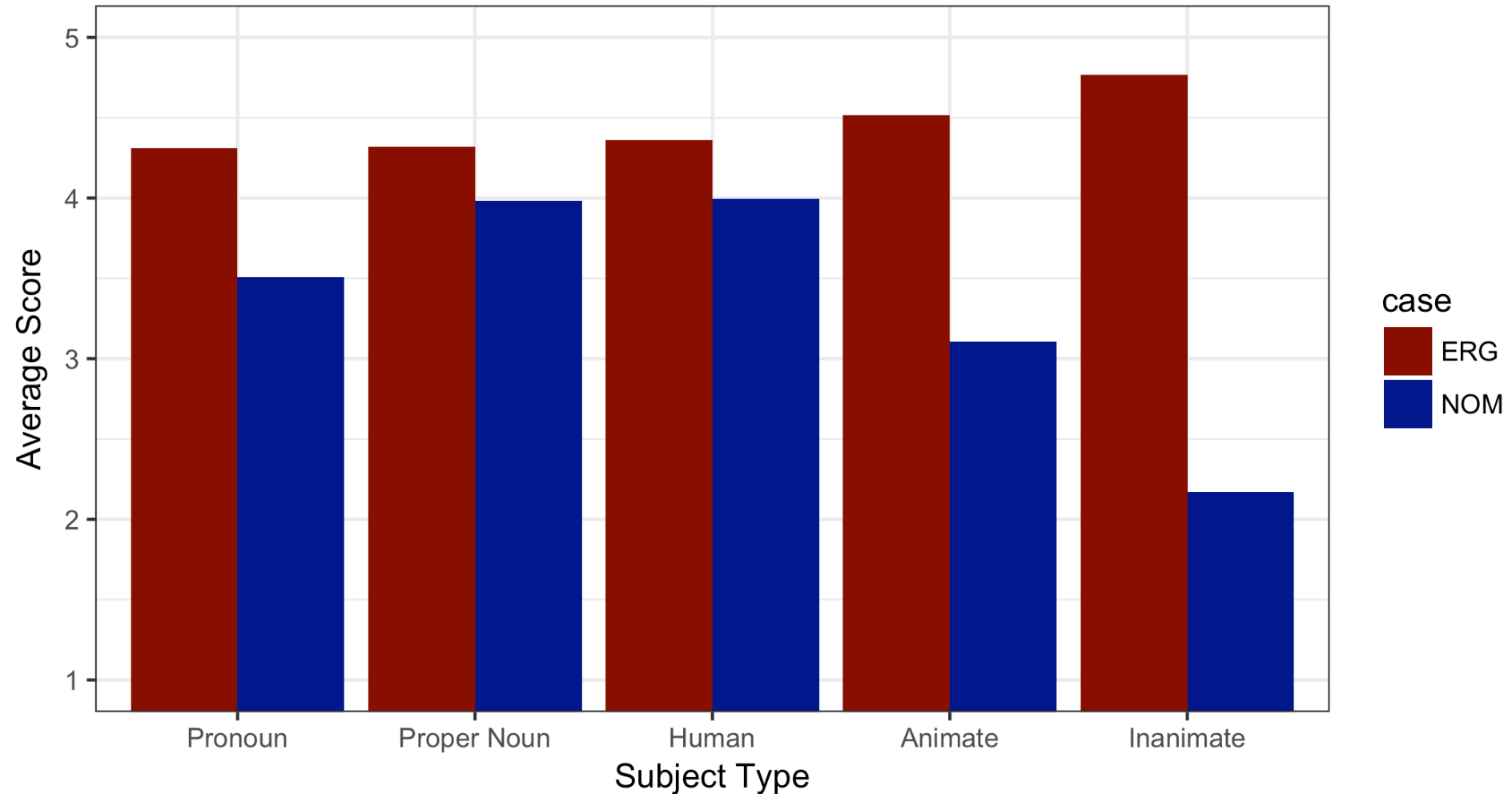
Silverstein (1976); Dixon (1994)

# Case Study 1: Animacy

- Verbeke (2015) points to counterexamples suggesting that the split is not categorical
- Pokharel (1998) notes that ergative marking is *less likely* with human-denoting subjects and *more likely* with other animate common nouns
- Elicitation consultants express a preference for nominative on first person pronouns

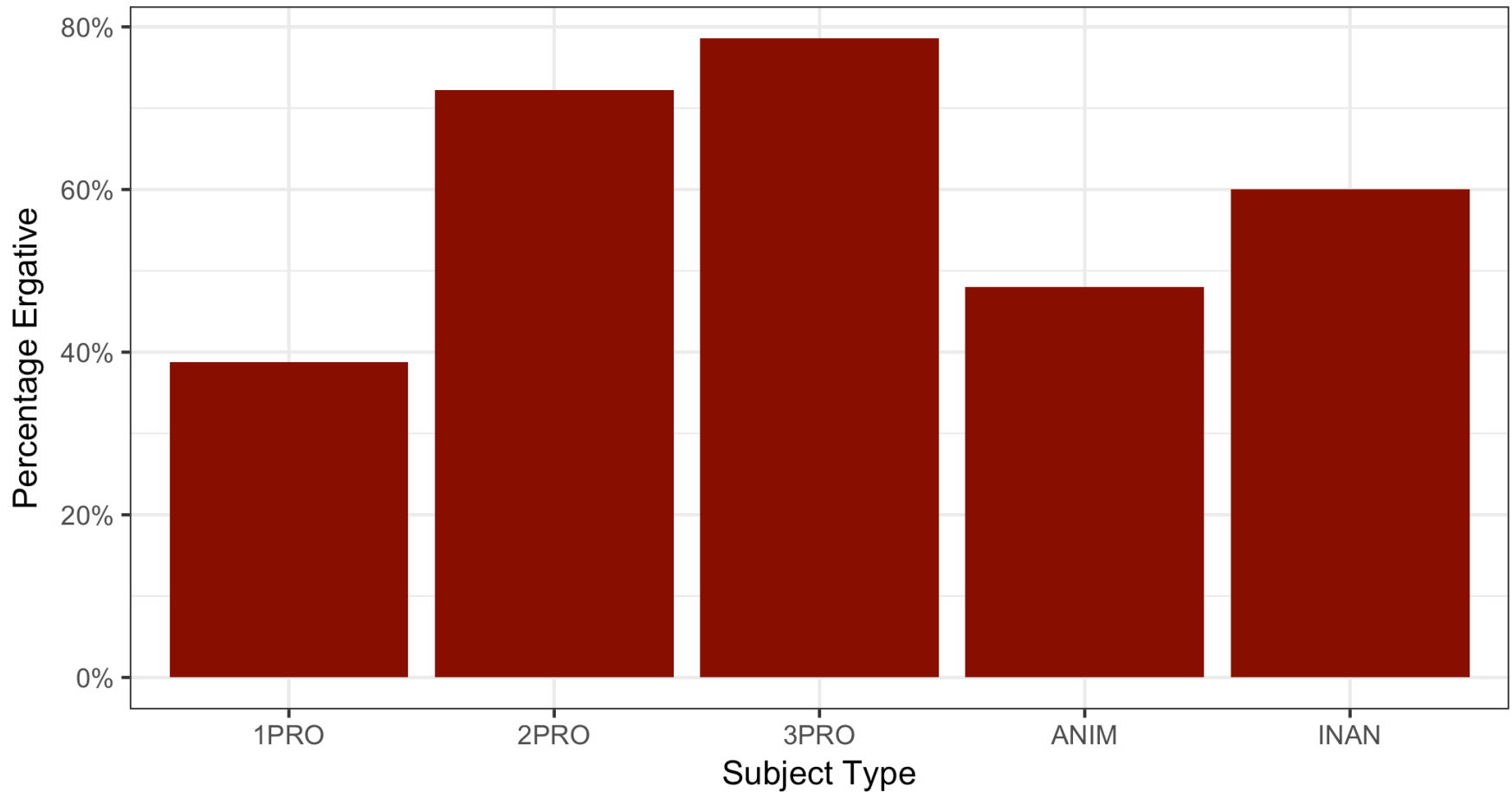
# Case Study 1: Animacy

Survey Results for Subject Type



# Case Study 1: Animacy

Corpus: Ergativity by Subject Type



# Case Study 1: Animacy

- No categorical splits along a hierarchy but rather gradient tendencies based on two separate properties:
  - Animacy (inanimate vs. animate)
  - Person (1PRO vs. Other)
- Frequency may play a role:
  - 1PRO is the most common overt argument type in  $S_t$ : 46.6% (n=109)
  - Inanimate is the least common overt argument type in overt  $S_t$ : 5.9% (n=14)

# Case Study 2: Agency/Volitionality

- Verma (1976) argues for Volitionality as a factor (but only when marking demoted subjects of passives)
- Ahearn (2001): Emerging usage of the ergative to emphasize agency among youths in a Magar village

# Case Study 2: Agency/Volitionality

- Næss (2004): Typical A is a Controller
- ERG/NOM alternations correlating with Volitionality are found in many languages, for example:
  - Dani (Foley 1986)
  - Tsova-Tush (Holisky 1987)
  - Hindi (Butt 2001)



# Case Study 2: Agency/Volitionality

- However, I found **no evidence for such Volitional alternations** in Nepali:

ma/\*maile

jāni.jāni

lāḍ-ẽ

I.nom/\*I.ERG

purpose.RED

trip-PERF.1.SG

'I tripped on purpose.' [TD]

# Case Study 2: Agency/Volitionality

- However, I found **no evidence for such Volitional alternations** in Nepali:

sahuji/sahuji-le                      jāni.jāni                      khok-nu bhayo  
shopkeeper/shopkeeper-ERG   purpose.RED           cough-PERF.3.SG.HON  
'The shopkeeper coughed on purpose (to get my attention).' [ST]

ciso-ko            karan-le            sahuji/sahuji-le                      khok-nu bhayo  
cold-GEN   reason-INSTR   shopkeeper/shopkeeper-ERG           cough-PERF.3.SG.HON  
'The shopkeeper coughed because of a cold.' [ST]

# Case Study 2: Agency/Volitionality

- If interpreted as a characterizing predicate, the ergative may correspond with a **lower degree of agency**

ma	curoṭ	khān-chu
I	cigarette	eat-PRES.1.SG

'I smoke cigarettes (occasionally).' [PK]

maile	curoṭ	khān-chu
I.ERG	cigarette	eat-PRES.1.SG

'I smoke cigarettes (I am addicted).' [PK]

# The Contribution of *-le*

- The morphological form *-le* is associated with a single meaning:
  - It marks the **Effector** of the event described by the clause
- As a marker on transitive subjects, it is part of complex ergative subject-marking pattern
- All the semantic and pragmatic feature correlations we have seen arise from its pragmatic usage in grammatical domains where it is unexpected

# The Contribution of *-le*

- Non-ergative usages of *-le*:
  - On an **instrumental** argument

maile	camcā-le	bhāt	khā-ẽ
I.ERG	spoon-INSTR	rice	eat-PERF.1.SG

'I ate rice with a spoon.' [TD]

dudh-le	keṭā-haru-lāi	pos-cha
milk-INSTR	child-PL-ACC	nourish-PRES.3.SG

'By milk (one) nourishes children.' [SB] (contra Verma 1976)

# The Contribution of *-le*

- Non-ergative usages of *-le*:
  - On reason clauses

pāunā      āu-na-le      ma timro      bihā-mā  
guest      come-NON.FIN-INSTR      I      your      wedding-loc

jā-na      pā-ina  
go-non.fin      get-perf.1.sg.neg

‘Because of guests’ coming, I could not go to your wedding.’

Butt and Poudel

(2007)

# The Contribution of *-le*

- Non-ergative usages of *-le*:
  - On **reason clauses**

“aphai-le”	<b>bhan-na-le</b>	āphno	paisā	tir-era
SELF-ERG	<b>say-NONFIN-INSTR</b>	SELF.GEN	money	pay-CONJ

‘By saying “myself”, (I mean) paying my own money.’  
[V001001004; M7]

# The Contribution of *-le*

- Non-ergative usages of *-le*:
  - On **modal constructions**

*rām-le/lāi*      *ããp*      *khā-nu*      *par-cha*  
Ram-ERG/ACC   mango      eat-NON.FINneed-PRES.3.SG  
‘Ram must eat mangoes.’ [AG]

- Ergative: Ram is obligated to eat mangoes.
- Accusative: Ram is forced to eat mangoes.



# The Contribution of *-le*

Dowty 1991: Agent Proto-role entailments on predicates with respect to their arguments

## Agent Entailments

Volitional

Sentience

Causation

Movement

## Instrument Entailments

-

-

Causation

Movement

# The Contribution of *-le*

- Fauconnier 2011: Prototypical subject properties are **Affector** of O and **Instigator** of event
  - Instrumental affects but doesn't instigate
- Ergatives and Instrumentals are homophonous in many languages (McGregor 2010)
  - Common Grammaticalization pathway INSTR- $\rightarrow$  ERG (Garrett 1990, Croft 2016)
  - Ergativity in Indo-Aryan **did not** arise this way, but the ergative marker reinforced an inflectional case which was lost

# The Contribution of *-le*

- In Nepali:  $ERG = S_t + INSTR$
- On a transitive subject, *-le* is redundant because the property of effecting the event is already entailed by subjecthood

# The Contribution of *-le*

- The usage of *-le* highlights the subject's role as an effector of the event
  - But **not** as the Instigator (controller, volitional agent) of the event
  - This distinguishes Nepali from languages like Tsova-Tush and Hindi (for which the instrumental and ergative are not homophonous)

# The Contribution of *-le*

- The usage of *-le* highlights the subject's role as an effector of the event
  - When the subject is unexpected (as with non-human animates or inanimates), *-le* is more likely (Fauconnier 2011)
  - All the semantic/pragmatic features are implicatures relating to the effector property
  - Thus speakers may use them differently depending upon the context and their own choices about information packaging

# Conclusions

- Many semantic and pragmatic features correlate with ergative marking, but they tend to be **limited** in scope and are **not categorical**
- They can be subsumed under a unified analysis of *-le* as marking the **Effector** of an event
- This precise analysis may be applicable to other languages in which the ergative and instrumental are homophonous
- These feature associations are likely to appear in any language with variable case marking of core arguments

# धन्यवाद

Claire Bower, Jim Wood, Kristine Hildebrandt, Paul Kockelman, Ashwini Deo, Veneeta Dayal, Laurence Horn, Maria Piñango, Madav Pokharel, Tikaram Poudel, Dan Raj Regmi, Biplob Acharya, Sajju Tamang, Christopher Geissler, Mikäela Chase, Matthew Tyler, Joshua Phillips, Rikker Dockum, Rashad Ullah, Alysia Harris, Sara Sanchez-Alonso, Sarah Babinski, Sushant Banjara, Timila Dakhwa, Anobha Gurung, Prashanta Kharel, Rijan Maharjan, Geeta Manandhar, Sabin Pokharel, Uddhab Pokharel

# References



- Abadie, P. (1974). Nepali as an ergative language. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*, 1(1):156–177.
- Acharya, J. (1991). *A descriptive grammar of Nepali and an analyzed corpus*. Georgetown University Press.
- Ahearn, L. M. (2001). Language and agency. *Annual review of anthropology*, 30(1):109–137.
- Aissen, J. (2003). Differential object marking: Iconicity vs. economy. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 21(3):435–483.
- Bickel, B. (2011). Grammatical relations typology. In Song, J. J., editor, *The Oxford handbook of language typology*, pages 399–445. Oxford University Press.
- Butt, M. and Poudel, T. (2007). Distribution of the ergative in nepali. *Manuscript, University of Konstanz*.
- Clark, T. W. (1963). *Introduction to Nepali: a first-year language course*. School of Oriental and African studies, University of London.
- Croft, W. (2012). *Verbs: Aspect and causal structure*. OUP Oxford.
- DeLancey, S. (2011). ‘Optional’ ‘Ergativity’ in Tibeto-Burman Languages. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*, 34(2):9–20.
- Deo, A. and Sharma, D. (2006). Typological variation in the ergative morphology of Indo-Aryan languages.
- Dixon, R. M. (1994). *Ergativity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dowty, D. (1991). Thematic proto-roles and argument selection. *language*, pages 547–619.
- Du Bois, J. W. (1987). The discourse basis of ergativity. *Language*, pages 805–855.
- Fauconnier, S. (2011). Differential agent marking and animacy. *Lingua*, 121(3):533–547.
- Grierson, G. A. (1904). Specimens of Pahari languages and Gujuri. *Linguistic Survey of India*, 9(4).

- Holisky, D. A. (1987). The case of the intransitive subject in Tsova-Tush (Batsbi). *Lingua*, 71(1-4):103–132.
- Hopper, P. J. and Thompson, S. A. (1980). Transitivity in grammar and discourse. *language*, pages 251–299.
- Hutt, M. and Subedi, A. (1999). *Teach Yourself Nepali. A complete course in understanding, speaking and writing Nepali*. Hodder Headline.
- Li, C. (2007). Split ergativity and split intransitivity in Nepali. *Lingua*, 117(8):1462–1482.
- Lindemann, L. (2016). Nepali *le* as a marker of categorical subjecthood. *Formal Approaches to South Asian Languages*, 2.
- Matthews, D. (1998). *Course in Nepali*. Routledge.
- McGregor, W. B. (2010). Optional ergative case marking systems in a typological-semiotic perspective. *Lingua*, 120(7):1610–1636.
- Næss, Å. (2004). What markedness marks: the markedness problem with direct objects. *Lingua*, 114(9):1186–1212.
- Pokharel, M. P. (1998). Categorical splits in the use of *-le* in nepali. *Nepalese Linguistics: Journal of the Linguistics Society of Nepal*, 15:42–50.
- Poudel, T. (2008). Nepali ergativity: A historical perspective. *Presentation handout from*.
- Pradhān, P. (1944). *Nepālī Vyākaraṇ*. MacMillan and Co., fourth edition edition.
- Schmidt, R. L. (1993). *A practical dictionary of Modern Nepali*. Schoenhofs Foreign Books.
- Silverstein, M. (1976). Hierarchy of features and ergativity. *Grammatical categories in Australian languages*.
- Turnbull, A. ([1923] 1982). *Nepali Grammar & Vocabulary*. Asian Educational Services.
- Verbeke, S. (2011). *Ergativity and alignment in Indo-Aryan*. PhD thesis, Ghent University.
- Verbeke, S. and De Cuypere, L. (2015). Differential subject marking in nepali imperfective constructions: A probabilistic grammar approach. *Studies in Language*, 39(1):1–23.

Verma, M. K. (1976). The notion of subject and the data from Nepali. *The notion of subject in South Asian languages*, 2.

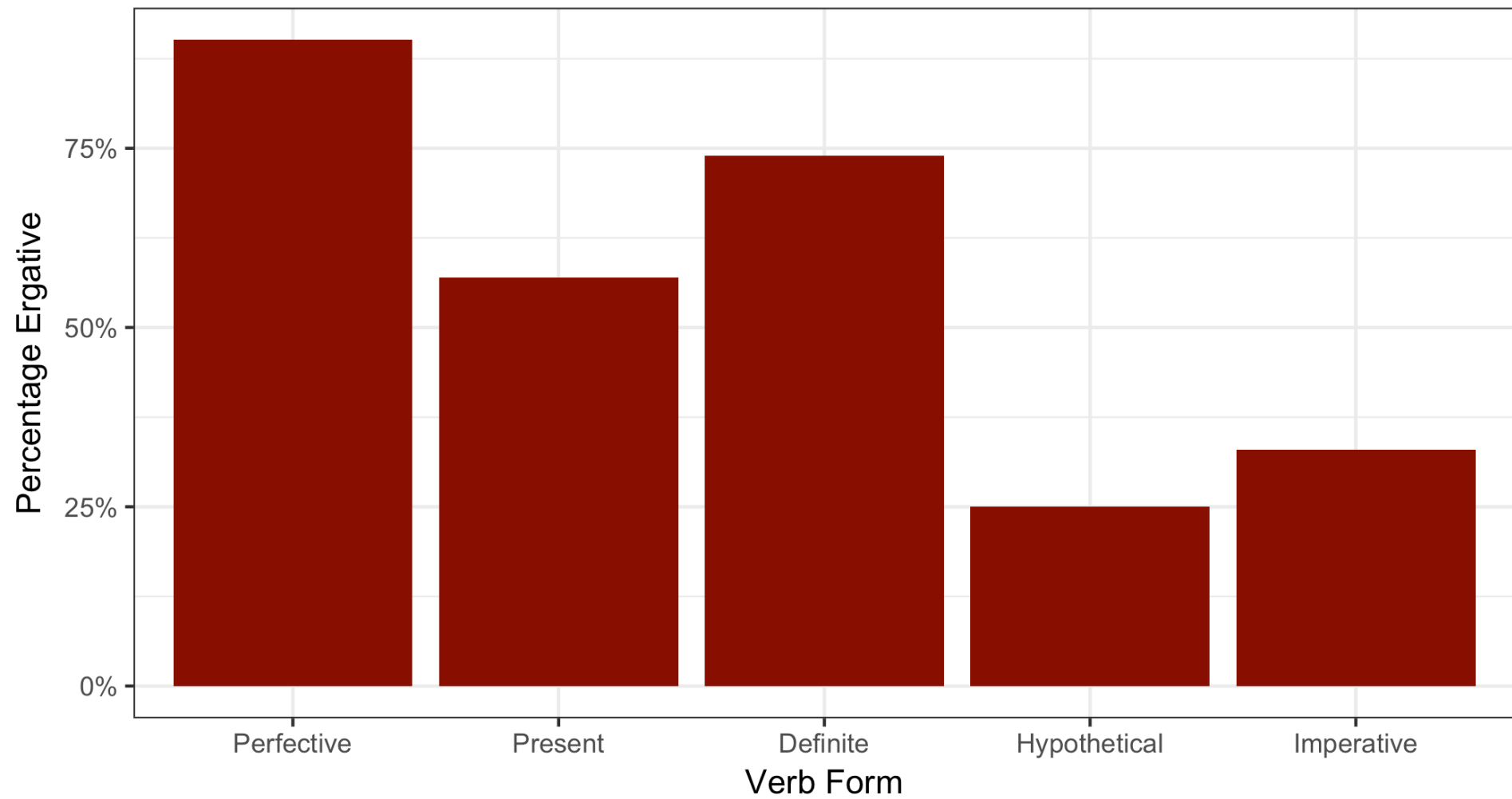
Yadava, Y. P., Hardie, A., Lohani, R. R., Regmi, B. N., Gurung, S., Gurung, A., McEnery, T., Allwood, J., and Hall, P. (2008). Construction and annotation of a corpus of contemporary Nepali. *Corpora*, 3(2):213–225.

# Appendices

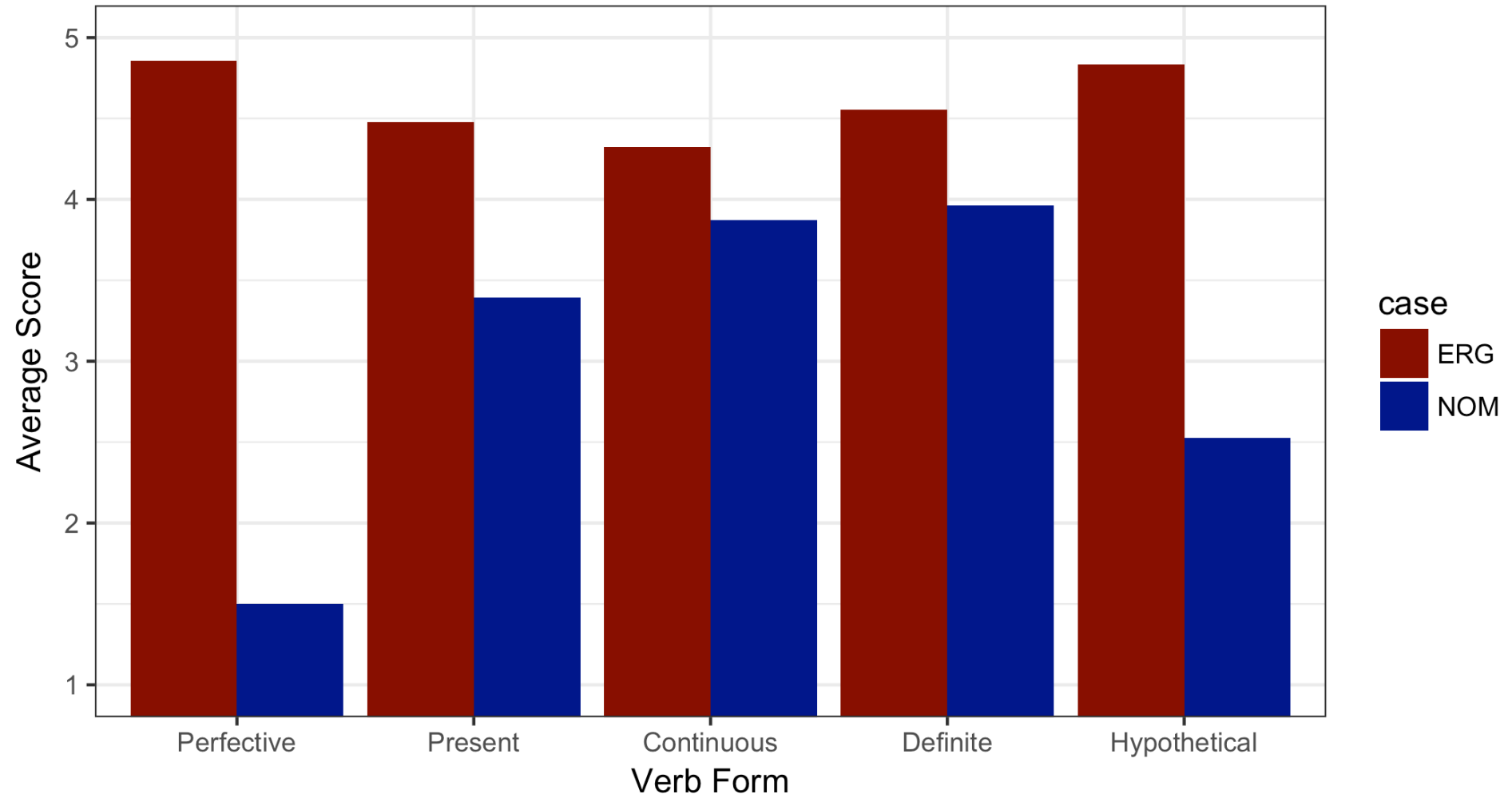
# Elicitation Consultants

Name	ID	Sex	Birth Region	Residence	Native Language	Parent L1	Education
Biplob Acharya	BA	Male	Province 3	Province 3	Nepali	Nepali	University
Sushant Banjara	SB	Male	Province 1	USA	Nepali	Nepali	University
Bibek Basnet	BB	Male	Province 1	USA	Nepali	Nepali	University
Timila Dakhwa	TD	Female	Province 3	USA	Nepali	Nepali, Newari	University
Anobha Gurung	AG	Female	Province 3	USA	Nepali	Gurung, Nepali	University
Min Gurung	MG	Male	Gandaki	Gandaki	Gurung, Nepali	Gurung	SLC
Prashanta Kharel	PK	Male	Province 3	USA	Nepali	Nepali, Newari	University
Rijan Maharjan	RM	Male	Province 3	USA	Nepali, Newari	Nepali, Newari	University
Geeta Manandhar	GM	Female	Province 3	Province 3	Nepali, Newari	Newari	University
Sabin Pokharel	SP	Male	Province 3	Province 3	Nepali	Nepali	University
Uddhab Pokharel	UP	Male	Province 3	Province 3	Nepali	Nepali	University
Kamal Sharma	KS	Male	Province 1	USA	Nepali	Nepali	SLC
Sajju Tamang	ST	Female	Province 3	Province 3	Nepali	Nepali	University

## Corpus Results by Verb Form



## Survey Results by Verb Form



# Case Study 3: Individual-Level Predication

- Butt and Poudel (2007) argue that the ergative marks an **Individual-Level Predicate** in Simple Present Verb Forms like the following:

mero kākā	gāḍi	cil-āu-nu huncha
my uncle	car	drive-CAUS-PRES.3.SG.HON

`My uncle is driving/ will drive a car.' [BA]

mero kākā-le	gāḍi	cil-āu-nu huncha
my uncle-ERG	car	drive-CAUS-PRES.3.SG.HON

`My uncle drives a car.' [BA]

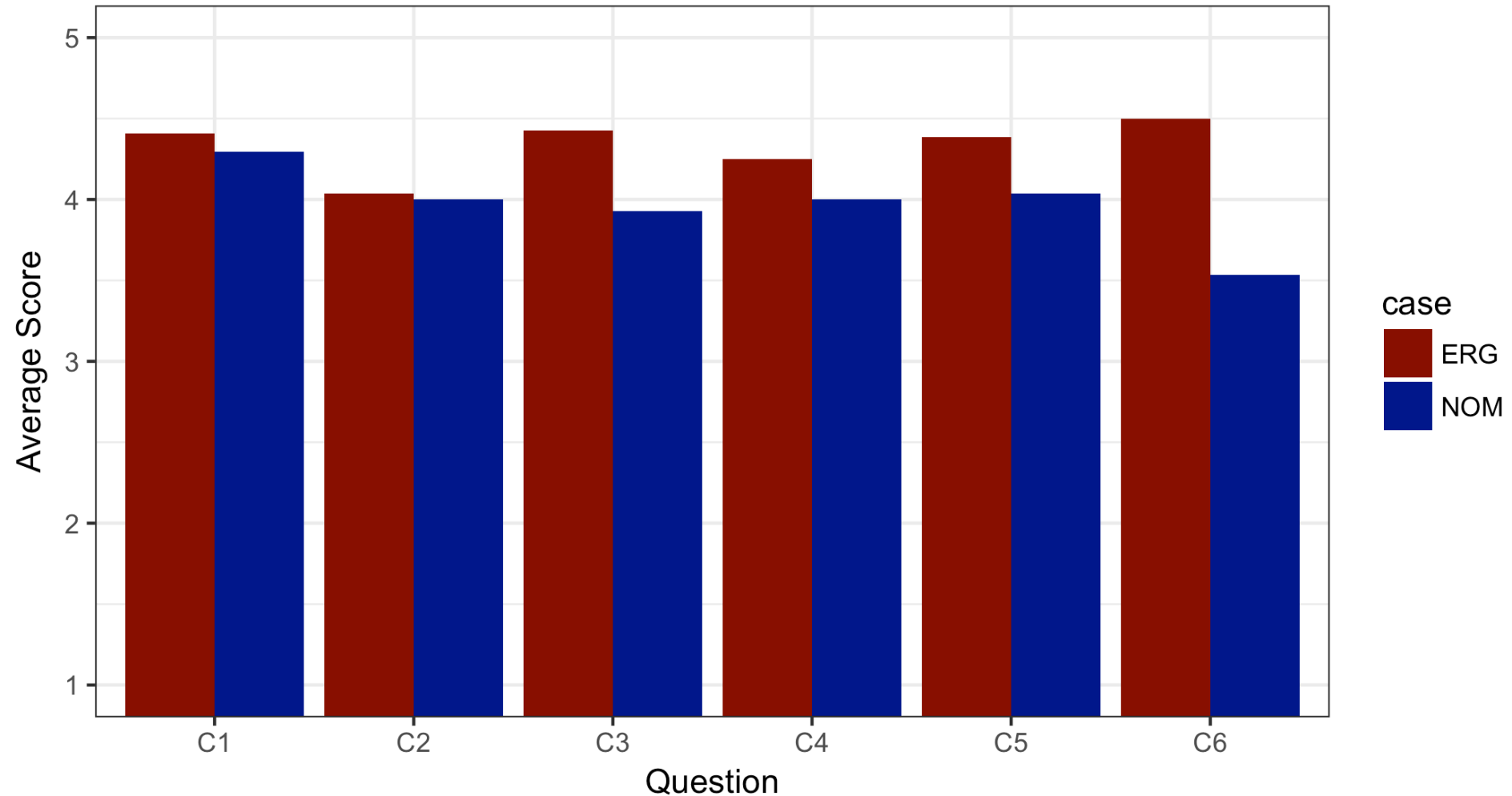


# Case Study 3: Individual-Level Predication

- Most (but not all) elicitation consultants expressed this same intuition
- This generalization is limited to the simple present domain
  - Erg/nom variability also exists in the continuous (stage-level) and past habitual (individual-level)
- It is a general tendency rather than a categorical statement about case marking:

# Case Study 3: Individual-Level Predication

Survey Results for Stage/Individual Predication



# Case Study 3: Individual-Level Predication

tei	laan-chu	hai	maile
that.EMPH	take-PRES.1.SG	PRT	I.ERG

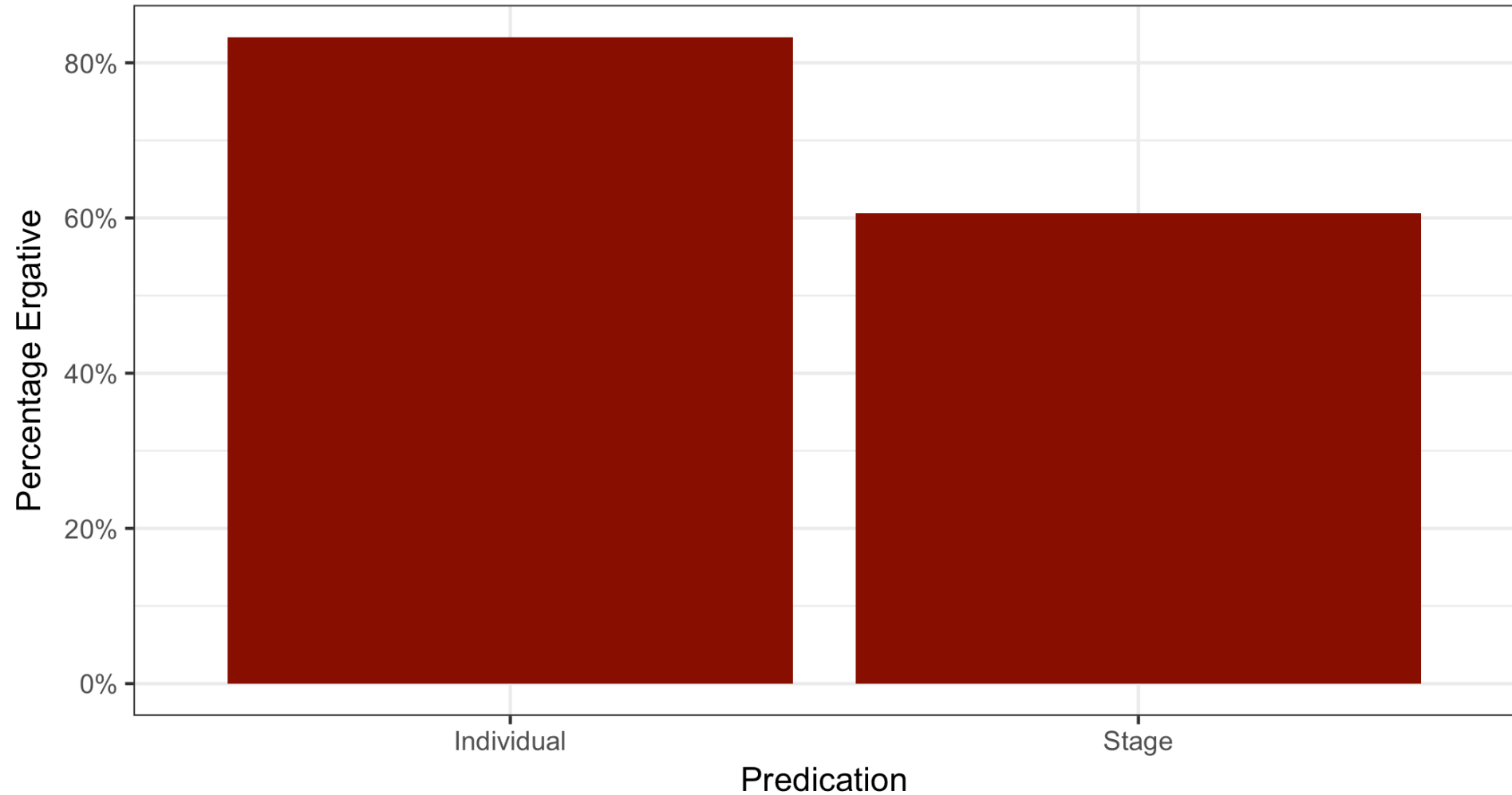
`I will take that one as well.' [V001001004; M7]

bhitra.bhitra	tyo	gaĩḍā	āl-mā	khel-cha
inside.RED	there	rhino	lake-LOC	play-PRES.3.SG

`Way inside there, rhinos play in the lake.' [V001002005; M7]

# Case Study 3: Individual-Level Predication

Corpus: SLP/ILP in Simple Present



# Case Study 3: Individual-Level Predication

- A substantial minority of elicitation consultants (TD, UK, BB, SB) had the **opposite intuition**: Ergative marking correlates with a Stage-Level interpretation of the event

# Case Study 3: Individual-Level Predication

- Compare: ongoing/future-oriented to habitual
- Often a characterizing predicate
- Hence the intuition of a Categorical Proposition

u            kām            gar-cha  
PRO        work            do-PRES.3.SG  
'(S)he is doing work / will do work.' [SB]

usle            kām            gar-cha  
PRO.ERG    work            do-pres.3.sg  
'(S)he does work.' [SB]

# Case Study 3: Individual-Level Predication

- Compare: individuated/non-individuated object
- Highlights transitivity (effect of  $S_t$  on O)
- Attested elsewhere (Hopper and Thompson 1980)

u            kām            gar-cha  
PRO        work            do-PRES.3.SG  
'(S)he is doing work.' [SB]

usle            kām            gar-cha  
PRO.ERG    work            do-pres.3.sg  
'(S)he is doing a job.' [SB]

# Case Study 3: Individual-Level Predication

- Rather than a logical entailment, the clause can be interpreted in multiple ways
- What unifies these two intuitions is that the ergative form emphasizes the subject as that entity that effects the event



