Nepali -le as a Marker of Categorical Subjecthood

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Many Indo-Aryan languages have a split in ergative marking conditioned by aspect.

In general, there is a nominative-accusative pattern of case-marking with verbal agreement in the imperfective domain, and an ergative pattern of case-marking and verbal agreement in the perfective domain.

We can see this pattern as it occurs in Hindi (examples from Deo and Sharma 2006:376):
(1) rām-ne cidiyā dekh-ī
ram.M-ERG sparrow.F.NOM see-PERF.F.SG
‘Ram saw a sparrow.’

(2) sita rām-ko dekh-t-ī h-ai
sita.F.NOM ram.M-ACC see-IMPF-F.SG be-PRES.3.SG
‘Sita sees Ram.’
Introduction: Nepali

(3) rām-le cidi dekh-yo
    ram.M-ERG sparrow.NOM see-PERF.3.SG
    ‘Ram saw a sparrow.’

(4) sita / sita-le rām-lāi dekh-chin
    sita.F.NOM / sita.F-ERG ram-ACC see-PRES.F.3.SG
    ‘Sita sees Ram.’
Puzzle: What does -le contribute in imperfective clauses?

- Emphasis (Grierson 1904, Clark 1963, Masica 1991)
- Disambiguation (Abadie 1974)
- Differential Subject Marking (Li 2007, Bickel 2011)
- Individual-Level Predication (Butt and Poudel 2007)
disambiguation

(5)  

a. yo gāi-le khā-ncha  
   this cow-erg eat-pres.3.sg  
   ‘This cow eats.’  

b. yo gāi khā-ncha  
   this cow eat-pres.3.sg  
   ‘This cow eats/This (one) eats cow.’
This seems to be true for cases like (5). Speakers will tend to interpret “cow” as a subject in (5a) and as an object in (5b). But -le may be found in many situations where we cannot say that leaving it off would lead to ambiguity:
Disambiguation

(6) gāi-(le) yo khān-cha
cow-(erg) this eat-PRES.3.SG

‘A/The cow eats this.’
Examples from Butt and Poudel 2007:

(7)  

a. cālak-le gāḍi calāun-cha  
   driver-ERG car  drive-PRES.3.SG  
   ‘The driver drives the vehicles.’

b. guru gāḍi calāun-cha  
   teacher car  drive-PRES.3.SG  
   ‘The teacher is driving/will drive the vehicle.’
Problems with the Individual-Predication Account

It is possible for an individual-level predicate to have an unmarked subject:

(8) cālak gāḍi calāun-cha
driver-ERG car drive-PRES.3.SG
‘The driver drives the vehicles.’

It is possible for a stage-level predicate to have a le-marked subject:

(9) guru-le gāḍi calāun-dai-cha
teacher-ERG car drive-CONT-PRES.3.SG
‘The teacher is driving/will drive the vehicle.’
My suggestion: 

- le marks the subject of a categorical proposition

- Kuroda 1972 proposed a grammaticalized categorical/thetic division as an analysis of Japanese topic markers.

- These notions come from the theories of judgment propounded by the 19th century philosophers Brentano and Marty.

- A judgment may be expressed by either a thetic or a categorical proposition.
A **thetic proposition** is a description of an entity or an eventuality, with no element of the sentence given particular discourse prominence.

A **categorical proposition** is a double judgment.

- An entity is presented. The existence of this entity must be presupposed.
- Then, a property is predicated of this entity.
For a Subject marked with -le:
- The referent is a **Topic** (the referent’s existence is presupposed)
- The determiner phrase is strongly construed

The Predicate of the clause:
- may be Stage-Level or Individual-Level (cf. Ladusaw 1994, Kuroda 1990, contra Butt and Poudel 2007)
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

(10) What is happening outside? *(Bahira ke hundaicha?)*

a. shikāri / shikāri-le mrigā
   hunter / hunter-(ERG) deer
   samāt-dai-cha
   catch-CONT-PRES.3.SG
   ‘The/A hunter is hunting a deer.’

(11) What is that hunter doing? *(Shikāri-le ke gardaicha?)*

a. #shikāri / shikari-le mrigā
   hunter / hunter-ERG deer
   samāt-dai-cha
   catch-CONT-PRES.3.SG
   ‘The hunter is hunting a deer.’
Evidence from Discourse Context

- In general, “hunter” cannot be marked if the existence of a hunter has not been previously established.
- If the question concerns a state of affairs, -le is optional. (The speaker can choose to respond thetically or categorically)
- If the question concerns an entity like the hunter, then -le is obligatory.
Strong and Weak Readings of Ambiguous Quantifiers

Following the notion of strong/weak construal of ambiguous quantifiers and examples from Partee 1983:

(12)  a. Some unicorns entered the garden.
     b. Many people were at the party.

Nepali quantifiers which appear to be similarly ambiguous include dherai ‘many’, and kohi ‘some’, (among others).

A strong construal presupposes the existence of a set.
A weak construal is indefinite, may be found in thetic propositions.
Ambiguity with Unmarked ‘Many’

Context: The students in the class work very hard on their studies.

(13) **dherai** biddyaarthi din-ko dui-tin ghanṭā
t many student day-GEN two-three hour
sik-chan
learn-PRES.3.PL

‘Many students / Many of the students study 2-3 hours a
day.’
Context: The students in the class work very hard on their studies.

(14) 

\texttt{dherai biddyaarthi-le din-ko dui-tin ghan\text{\text$\tilde{\text{\textalpha}}$}}
\texttt{many student-LE day-GEN two-three hour sik-chan}
\texttt{learn-PRES.3.PL}

‘Many of the students study 2-3 hours a day.’
Context: The students in the class work very hard on their studies.

(15) **kohi.kohi** biddyaarthi din-ko dui-tin ghanṭā some.RED student day-GEN two-three hour sik-chan learn-PRES.3.PL

‘Some students / Some of the students study 2-3 hours a day.’
Context: The students in the class work very hard on their studies.

(16) **kohi.kohi** biddyaarthi-le din-ko dui-tin ghanṭā some.RED student-LE day-GEN two-three hour sik-chan learn-PRES.3.PL

‘Some of the students study 2-3 hours a day.’
Context: The students in the class work very hard on their studies.

(17) **dheraijaso** biddyaarthi din-ko dui-tin ghanṭā most student day-GEN two-three hour sik-chan learn-PRES.3.PL

‘Most of the students study 2-3 hours a day.’
Strong Construal with Unmarked Marked ‘Most’

Context: The students in the class work very hard on their studies.

(18) **dheraijaso** biddyaarthi-le din-ko dui-tin ghanṭā
     most student-LE day-GEN two-three hour
     sik-chan
     learn-PRES.3.PL

‘Most of the students study 2-3 hours a day.’
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Strong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dherai N</td>
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<tr>
<td>dherai N-le</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>dheraijaso N-le</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Strong Readings with Elided Subjects

Context: If I’m going to house sit, I need to know about the dietary restrictions of all of your house cats.

(19) kohi.kohi / kohi.kohi-le māca khān-chan
    some.RED / some.RED-ERG fish eat-PRES.3.PL
    ‘Some (of the cats) eat fish.’

(20) dherai / dherai-le māca khān-chan
    many / many-ERG fish eat-PRES.3.PL
    ‘Many (of the cats) eat fish.’

(21) #dheraijaso / dheraijaso-le māca khān-cha
    #most / most-ERG fish eat-PRES.3.SG
    ‘Most (of the cats) eat fish.’
## Quantifier Readings with Elided Nouns

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<tr>
<td>dheraijaso-le</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In a discourse, -le is felicitous if the subject relates directly to the question under discussion.
The evidence from quantifiers tell us that a le-marked noun phrase must have strong construal.
This fits with the notion that -le is a topic marker.
More evidence is needed to determine the semantic difference between bare dherai and dherai-le, which both have strong construal.
Why is -le obligatory for dheraijaso when the noun is elided?
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Sources


