

The Nepali Effector Ergative and Variation in Optional Ergativity

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Abstract

Nepali presents with a complex case-marking pattern in which ergative case is obligatory in the perfective transitive domain and varies with the nominative elsewhere. Where variable, its usage correlates with individual-level predication, categorical propositions, individuated objects, and bounded events. Unlike other languages with optional ergativity, it does not correlate with the volitionality or agentivity of the subject. These associations have two sources. The first is discourse prominence. In any system where a case marker varies with its absence, the presence of the marker will be associated with higher prominence. A subject marked as prominent in the discourse will tend to be interpreted as definite, contrastively focused, and the logical subject of a categorical proposition. The second source is the semantic contribution of the ergative case-marker itself, which is related to prototype features of transitive subjects. The relevant features are Instigator (the initiator of the event) and Effector (the enactor and effector of the event). In a point of variation among ergative systems, the Nepali ergative marks the participant as an Effector but not as an Instigator. As a component of the ergative case-marking system, it implicates the subject as a participant in a prototypically transitive event.

1 Introduction

Nepali deviates from the canonical Indo-Aryan pattern of ergative marking conditioned by perfective aspect (Masica 1993:342), which is demonstrated for Hindi in the examples below:¹

- (1) **sītā** rām-ko dekh-tī **hai**
Sita.F.NOM Ram.M-ACC see-IMPF PRES.3.SG.F
'Sita sees Ram.' (Deo and Sharma 2006:376)
- (2) rām-ne **cidiyā** dekh-ī
Ram.M-ERG sparrow.F.ABS see-PERF.SG.F
'Ram saw a sparrow.' (Deo and Sharma 2006:376)

¹*Abbreviations:* M, Masculine; F, Feminine; PL, Plural; 1, First person; 2, Second person; 3, Third person; HON, Honorific; PRO, Pronoun; NOM, Nominative; ABS, Absolutive; ERG, Ergative; DAT, Dative; LOC, Locative; TOP, Topic marker; RED: plural reduplicant; PERF, Perfective; IMPF, Past Imperfective; PRES, Simple Present; CONT, Continuous, NON.FIN, Non-finite; NEG, Negative; BEN: Benefactive; CAUS, Causative; LNK, Linking morpheme. Parentheses indicate optional morphemes. Examples from cited works have been minimally altered to conform to these glossing conventions.

With imperfective verb forms, as in (1), the transitive subject is in the unmarked nominative case, the object takes an accusative case marker *-ko*, and there is verbal cross-reference with the transitive subject. With perfective verb forms, as in (2), the transitive subject takes an ergative case marker *-ne*, the object is unmarked, and there is verbal cross-reference with the transitive object. This is the canonical split-ergative conditioned by perfective aspect.²

In Nepali, there is also a split in ergative case-marking conditioned by perfective aspect, but verbal cross-reference is straightforwardly nominative-accusative:

(3) **sītā**-(le) rām-lāi dekh-**chin**
Sita.F-(ERG) Ram-ACC see-PRES.3.SG.F

‘Sita sees Ram.’ (Lindemann 2016:88)

(4) **rām**-le cidi dekh-**yo**
Ram.M-ERG sparrow see-PERF.3.SG.M

‘Ram saw a sparrow.’ (Lindemann 2016:88)

For both imperfective (3) and perfective (4) verb forms, verbal cross-reference is always with the transitive subject.³ This is true whether the subject is unmarked or marked by an ergative case marker *-le*. As with Hindi, the transitive subject is marked ergative in the perfective (4). But the ergative marker may also be found in the imperfective (3). The ergative marker is “optional” in the sense that its presence or absence does not affect the grammaticality of the clause.

However, Nepali speakers typically have the intuition that the usage of the ergative imparts some added nuance of meaning (Grierson 1904, Abadie 1974, Pokharel 1998, Butt and Poudel 2007, Verbeke 2011). This difference is very difficult to pin down. There is substantial variation in responses and judgments are rarely categorical. Usage is highly dependent upon the discourse context and decisions that speakers make about the presentation of information. This is in line with the general literature on Optional Ergative Marking (OEM), which is widespread among Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in and around Nepal but rare among Indo-Aryan languages (McGregor 2010, Chelliah and Hyslop 2011, Faconnier 2011).

Ergative case in Nepali is constrained by the semantic factors of perfectivity and transitivity, which determine where ergative marking is obligatory, disallowed, or variable. Where it is variable (imperfective transitive clauses), its usage is subject to pragmatic considerations. This is schematized in Figure (1).⁴ For this paper, the focus will be on ergative marking in the imperfective transitive domain.

²This is a simplified picture of the Hindi case system with examples chosen to illustrate the canonical pattern. A more complete generalization is that verbal cross-reference in Hindi is with the highest unmarked argument. See Deo and Sharma (2006) for analyses of typological variation in Indo-Aryan ergative patterning.

³Gender is restricted to an optional marked feminine form for animate referents and it is frequently omitted in spoken Nepali. In the interlinear glosses I omit the default masculine (M) unless it is relevant to the discussion. Lindemann (2016) used the abbreviation IMPF for the (typically imperfective) Simple Present verb form, while this work uses the abbreviation PRES to distinguish it from the past imperfective verb form.

⁴Li (2007) argues that ergative marking is possible in the intransitive domain, where it is conditioned by a separate set of semantic factors. This interesting observation brings up questions about the nature of transitivity and the theoretical utility of the term “ergative.” See (Lindemann 2019:154-169) for a discussion of such cases and justification of the schema presented here.

	Transitive	Intransitive
Imperfective	ERG~NOM (Marking Variable)	NOM (Marking Disallowed)
Perfective	ERG (Marking Obligatory)	NOM (Marking Disallowed)

Figure 1: The domains of ergative and nominative case in Nepali

The data and examples presented here are from Lindemann (2019), for which I analyzed targeted elicitations with thirteen native speakers, conducted an acceptability judgment survey in Kathmandu in 2016, and annotated four conversations from the publicly-available Nepali National Spoken Corpus (Yadava et al. 2008).

In what follows, I will give an example of an ergative alternation for which speakers give different sets of intuitions that conflict with one another. I will argue that the first set of intuitions correspond to Butt and Poudel’s (2007) theory of the ergative as a marker individual-level predication and the discourse prominence theory advanced in Lindemann (2016). The second set of intuitions are in line with the predictions of markedness prototype theories of transitivity (Hopper and Thompson 1980, Croft 2012) and argument proto-roles (Næss 2004, Fauconnier 2011).

I will argue that the perceived conflict comes from the pragmatic usage of the ergative as either a marker of discourse prominence or else to specifically emphasize a prototypically transitive event. I will discuss the implications that this has for the Nepali nominal case system and for the variant patterns we see in languages with Optional Ergative Marking.

2 A Puzzle: Multiple Interpretations of Event Structure

The simple present tense in Nepali can have multiple possible interpretations. It can refer to a present-oriented habitual event, an ongoing event, or a future event:

- (5) *rām-(le) kām gar-cha*
 Ram.M-(ERG) work do-PRES.3.SG
 ‘Ram does/is doing/will do work.’ (Lindemann 2019:178)

Example (5) is potentially ambiguous between these three readings. There are separate verb forms that can be used to disambiguate particular interpretations. For example, *gar-ne-cha* is future-oriented, and the present progressive form *gar-dai-cha* refers to an ongoing event. But with the simple present form *gar-cha*, each of the above interpretations is possible.

In most varieties of Nepali, the ergative marker *-le* is possible on transitive subjects in the simple present verb form. Its usage is somewhat associated with colloquial speech and

may be prescriptively dispreferred (Lindemann 2019:56). However, in the corpus analysis every single speaker used the ergative with simple present tense verbs (with an overall rate of 58%) (Lindemann 2019:146). Grierson (1904) notes that its usage is associated with “emphasis” on the subject, a term which is also used by Clark (1963) and Masica (1993). Clark implies that the ergative-marked subject is focused, but Abadie (1974) and Verbeke (2011) convincingly argue that, while there may be a general correlation between focus and ergative case, marking is neither necessary nor sufficient for the subject to be focused.

A simpler explanation for the emphasis intuition is that it is an inherent aspect of optional case markings systems. Wherever a marker is in grammatical opposition with its absence, we should generally expect that the marked form will be associated with increased discourse prominence, as a marked form is associated with a marked meaning. This prominence may be likely to correlate with elements that are focused or contrastive topics, but the ergative is not restricted to elements which have these properties.

Intuitions about the difference between the nominative and ergative forms in sentences like (5) can be grouped into two major categories. The first is that the ergative distinguishes an incidental ongoing interpretation from a habitual interpretation. The ergative form is used to describe an occupation, habit, or inherent quality of the referent, while the nominative form may be reserved for ongoing events. With the predicate “drive car” this might distinguish between a present task and an occupation. This intuition is the basis of Butt & Poudel’s (2007) individual-level predication theory, which is discussed in the next section.

(6) Intuition (1): Habituality

- a. *rām kām gar-cha*
Ram.M work do-PRES.3.SG
‘Ram is doing work.’
- b. *rām-le kām gar-cha*
Ram.M-ERG work do-PRES.3.SG
‘Ram does work.’

The second set of intuitions relates to the interpretation of the object. The ergative is associated with an interpretation in which the object is more discrete, individuated or definite. With the predicate “do work” this roughly corresponds to the difference in English between “doing work” and “doing a job.” With “drive car” this might distinguish (in the typical absence of plural or definiteness marking) between “driving cars” and “driving a car.”

(7) Intuition (2): Object Individuation

- a. *rām kām gar-cha*
Ram.M work do-PRES.3.SG
‘Ram does/is doing work.’
- b. *rām-le kām gar-cha*
Ram.M-ERG work do-PRES.3.SG
‘Ram does/is doing a job.’

Note that these interpretations are potentially contradictory. With Intuition (1) the nominative form is associated with a transitory event and the ergative with a more lasting event.

With Intuition (2) the nominative is associated with an undifferentiated event (whether habitual or progressive), while the ergative is associated with a more particularized event. Thus for example if we wish to refer to Ram’s occupation, Intuition (1) would seem to indicate that we use the ergative, while Intuition (2) would indicate that we use the bare nominative.

How can the same marker be used for seemingly contradictory purposes? In the next two sections, I examine these intuitions more closely to show that the same mechanism of optional case-marking may be used in two distinct ways.

3 Individual-Level Predication and Discourse Prominence

Butt and Poudel (2007) argue that the ergative marks an individual-level predication. This term comes from Carlson’s (1977) division of predicates into two natural classes, stage-level and individual-level. Stage-level predicates describe transient or episodic states, and individual-level predicates describe enduring properties. While subsequent research has uncovered additional complexities to this dichotomy, some form of the distinction is found in the grammars of many languages, including English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Scottish Gaelic (Roy 2013, Sánchez-Alonso 2018).

Butt and Poudel (2007) give the example of a driver whose job it is to drive vehicles for a school, compared with a teacher who has been tasked to drive a vehicle on a particular day:

- (8) a. cālak-le gāḍi calāun-cha
 driver-ERG car drive-PRES.3.SG
 ‘The driver drives the vehicles.’ (Butt and Poudel 2007:5)
- b. guru gāḍi calāun-cha
 teacher car drive-PRES.3.SG
 ‘The teacher is driving/will drive the vehicle.’ (Butt and Poudel 2007:5)

Hutt and Subedi (1999) touch on the related notion that the ergative in the present tense is associated with generic or characterizing interpretations of predicates: the ergative “can be used to emphasise the subject of a transitive verb in the habitual present tense... if the sentence says that it is a part of the natural order of things for the subject to perform the verb, and therefore states that this is a role that is specific to the subject” (Hutt and Subedi 1999:116).

- (9) a. kukhurā-le phul pā-cha
 chicken-ERG egg lay-PRES.3.SG
 ‘A chicken lays eggs.’ (Hutt and Subedi 1999:116)
- b. ghām-le nyāno din-cha
 sunshine-ERG warmth give-PRES.3.SG
 ‘Sunshine gives warmth.’ (Hutt and Subedi 1999:116)
- c. pakkā bahun-le raksi khān-daina
 proper Brahmin-ERG alcohol eat-PRES.3.SG.NEG
 ‘A proper Brahmin does not drink alcohol.’ (Hutt and Subedi 1999:116)

Butt and Poudel (2007) provide theoretical backing to the intuition that the predicate describes something enduring and inherent about the subject. However, individual-level interpretation of the predicate is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for describing ergative case patterning. We still find ergative/nominative alternations with imperfective verb forms which are inherently stage-level:

- (10) rām-(le) kām gar-dai-cha
 Ram.M.NOM work do-CONT-PRES.3.SG
 ‘Ram is doing work.’ (Lindemann 2019)

Furthermore, while the individual-level interpretation may be a strong tendency, it is clearly not a categorical one (as noted by Verbeke 2011, Verbeke and De Cuypere 2015). In my analysis of Nepali conversations, I found the ergative to be somewhat more common on simple present verb forms with individual-level predicates, but there were numerous exceptions in both directions:

- (11) a. **ma** pheri ghar-mā gā-era phon gar-chu
 PRO.1.SG.NOM again home-LOC go.PERF-CONJ phone do-PRES.3.SG
 ‘I will go back home and then call you.’ *Stage-Level/Nominative* (Lindemann 2019:185)
- b. tei lān-chu hai **mai-le**
 that.EMP take-PRES.1.SG PRT PRO.1.SG.OBL-ERG
 ‘I will take that one as well.’ *Stage-Level/Ergative* (Lindemann 2019:185)
- c. bhitra.bhitra tyo **gāidā** āl-mā khel-cha
 inside.RED there rhino lake-LOC play-PRES.3.SG
 ‘Way inside there, rhinos play in the lake.’ *Individual-Level/Nominative* (Lindemann 2019:184)
- d. din-dainan **turist-haru-le** tips.sips jangal jā-ne-haru-lāi
 give-PRES.3.SG.NEG tourist-PL-ERG tips.RED jungle go-NON.FIN-PL-DAT
 ‘The tourists do not give tips or anything to the jungle guides.’ *Individual-Level/Ergative* (Lindemann 2019:184)

In Lindemann (2016), I argued on the basis of examples like (12) below that the ergative form marks a categorical proposition in these cases. The distinction between categorical andthetic propositions, which originated in the philosophical works of Franz Brentano and Anton Marty, was propounded by Kuroda (1972) in his analysis of Japanese nominal markers. In a categorical proposition, attention is first directed to a particular element of the clause, and then a property is predicated of that element. The marked element is typically definite and presupposed in the discourse. This is contrasted with athetic proposition, in which no particular element of the clause is given prominence.

- (12) a. **ma** curoṭ khān-chu
 PRO.1.SG.NOM cigarette consume-PRES.1.SG
 ‘I smoke cigarettes (occasionally).’ (Lindemann 2016:90)

- b. **mai-le** curoṭ khān-chu
 PRO.1.SG.OBL-ERG cigarette consume-PRES.1.SG
 ‘I smoke cigarettes (I am addicted).’ (Lindemann 2016:90)

While both (12a) and (12b) are interpreted as individual-level (habitual), many respondents find (12b) to be more “about” the subject, in the sense that the predicate defines an inherent or definitional property of the referent. In the context of smoking, this might distinguish between an occasional habit and an addiction or vice.

Categorical propositions are associated with aboutness theories of topicality (McNally 1998). Kuroda (1972) notes a correlation between categorical propositions and generic interpretations of predicates. Furthermore, Ladusaw (2000) describes an interaction between individual-level predicates and categorical propositions: ILPs (individual-level predicates) are restricted to categorical propositions, but categorical propositions may contain either individual-level or stage-level predicates. The categorical proposition theory therefore aligns with speaker intuitions about inherent properties without requiring an individual-level interpretation of the predicate.

However, the Nepali ergative marker is not precisely equivalent to a categorical subject marker. For one thing, it is restricted to the subject of a transitive clause. It cannot mark transitive objects or other arguments. While the referent of the ergative-marked subject is typically topical, presupposed, and definite, none of these are absolute requirements. Furthermore, Nepali already possesses a topic marker *cahĩ* which may attach to many types of arguments and has a very clear association with discourse structure and aboutness. The marked element is typically fronted, as in (13) below.

- (13) **hātti** **cahĩ** uhān-le “paṭh-ā-i-din-chu”
 elephant TOP PRO.3.SG.HON-ERG “send-CAUS-LNK-BEN-PRES.1.SG”
 bhan-nu bha-eko.cha
 say-PRES.PERF.3.SG.HON
 ‘As to the elephants, he has said, “(I) will send (them).”’ (Lindemann 2019:130)

The association between optional ergative marking and categorical propositions, on the other hand, is best described in terms of discourse prominence. In an optional ergative system, the ergative variant is associated with increased discourse prominence. Transitive subjects typically refer to old information with low discourse prominence (and are often elided in Nepali), so a mechanism which draws attention to an overt subject is naturally interpreted as marking a categorical proposition.

The association between topicality and discourse prominence is not unique to optional ergative marking, but may be found generally with optional case markers. For example, Aissen (2003) notes that in differential object marking systems like Hindi, accusative case marking may be associated with topicality in those domains where it is optional.

This is the source of all intuitions which I have grouped under Intuition (1): the ergative emphasizes the subject, and there is a habitual, characterizing, or generic interpretation of the predicate. However, other intuitions arise from the ergative marker characterizing a prototypically transitive event, and this is the source of Intuition (2).

4 Transitivity

The second set of intuitions relate to the individuated nature of the object or the interpretation of the event as bounded. The ergative alternate is associated with a particular instance of the object (“driving a car” as opposed to “driving cars”) or of an event (“doing a job” as opposed to “doing work”). These intuitions have not been as extensively discussed in the literature on Nepali case marking. Poudel (2008) gives the related example of an “accomplishment vs. non-accomplishment” alternation in (14) below, in which the ergative form implies that the action has been completed.

- (14) a. *rām-le bihāna-dekhi pāni bhy-ā-i-rah-eko cha*
ram-ERG morning-ABL water bear-CAUS-LNK-PROG-PRES.PERF.3.SG
‘Ram has been fetching water since this morning (and he finished fetching it).’
(Poudel 2008:8)
- b. *rām bihāna-dekhi pāni bhy-ā-i-rah-eko cha*
ram morning-ABL water bear-CAUS-LNK-PROG-PRES.PERF.3.SG
‘Ram has been fetching water since this morning (and he has not yet finished fetching it).’ (Poudel 2008:8)

Similarly, Verbeke (2011) suggests that the optional usage of the ergative form in the imperfective can imply the inherent completeness of the action. With a future or ongoing event, the implication may be that the outcome is certain.

These intuitions about boundedness, whether of the object or the event, suggest that the ergative alternate is associated with transitivity. Hopper and Thompson’s (1980) Transitivity Hypothesis conceives of transitivity as a cluster concept of features that describe the effectiveness by which an action is transferred among participants. These features are listed in Table (1).⁵ The hypothesis states that if an element encodes multiple features in a clause, the features will match in (high or low) transitivity.

This is widely applicable to split-ergative systems, for which the ergative form is associated with features of high transitivity and the nominative with low transitivity (Hopper and Thompson 1980:268). To take Nepali as an example, ergative marking is required in transitive clauses (PARTICIPANTS) if the verb form is perfective (ASPECT).⁶ The Transitivity Hypothesis does not make predictions about which specific features will be linked in any particular language, only that if they are linked the features will match in transitivity value.

⁵I have rearranged the features in the original chart from Hopper and Thompson (1980:252) to highlight that they broadly fall into three categories: the first five features relate to the features of the event itself, the following two relate to features of the transitive subject argument, and the final two relate to features of the object.

⁶The situation is more complicated if we follow Li (2007) in considering ergative marking to be possible in certain intransitive clauses. Li argues that ergative marking in Nepali is optional in intransitive clauses with atelic unergative predicates but disallowed if the predicate is unaccusative or telic. The unaccusative/unergative split is a feature of many Split-S case-marking systems, and in Hopper and Thompson’s schema this can be formulated as a low transitivity association between nominative case and an S_t which is non-volitional (VOLITIONALITY OF S_t) and low in potency (AGENCY OF S_t). However, the telic/atelic split runs counter to the predictions of the Transitivity Hypothesis: a telic predicate is associated with high transitivity (ASPECT), while nominative case is associated with low transitivity.

	High Transitivity	Low Transitivity
Participants	2 or more (S_t and O)	1 participant
Kinesis	eventive predicate	stative predicate
Aspect	telic or perfective	atelic or imperfective
Punctuality	punctual	non-punctual
Affirmation	affirmative	negative
Mode	realis	irrealis
Volitionality of S_t	S_t volitional	S_t non-volitional
Agency of S_t	S_t high in potency	S_t low in potency
Affectedness of O	O totally affected	O not affected
Individuation of O:	O highly individuated: (proper, human/animate, concrete singular, count, referential/definite)	O non-individuated: (common, inanimate, abstract plural, mass, non-referential)

Table 1: Hopper and Thompson's (1980) Transitivity Prototype

The Transitivity Hypothesis is formulated for obligatory feature correlations, and is less clearly applicable to the pragmatic considerations of optional case marking. On the one hand, Intuition (2) clearly conforms to the Transitivity Hypothesis: ergative marking is associated with high transitivity, and may convey that the object is highly individuated (INDIVIDUATION OF O: concrete, singular, count, or referential) or that the event is instantaneous (PUNCTUALITY) and bounded (ASPECT). Intuition (2) suggests that the usage of the ergative emphasizes that the subject is a participant in an effective transitive event.

On the other hand, Intuition (1) features do not accord with the Transitivity Hypothesis. Habitual aspect and individual-level, generic or characterizing predicates tend to be associated with low transitivity: they may be stative (KINESIS), imperfective (ASPECT), or non-punctual (PUNCTUALITY). Intuition (1) does not suggest that the usage of the ergative emphasizes that the subject is a participant in an effective transitive event. Discourse prominence is given to the subject in itself rather than to its participation in a transitive event.

There is a third set of features which are found in many languages with optional ergativity, and which relate to those transitivity features associated with the subject argument in Table(1): VOLITIONALITY OF S_t and AGENCY OF S_t . In many of the OEM languages surveyed by McGregor (2010) and Fauconnier (2011), the ergative variant emphasizes the agentivity and/or volitionality of the subject referent. Ergativity is associated with highly agentive or volitional subjects in several languages with optional ergativity, including Dani (Foley 1986), Tsova-Tush (Holisky 1987), and many of the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Nepal and the surrounding area (Chelliah and Hyslop 2011). In Hindi, ergative marking is optional with some intransitive predicates. The usage of the ergative variant emphasizes the volitionality of the subject referent.

- (15) a. *rām-ne chīkh-ā*
 Ram-ERG scream-PERF.SG.M
 'Ram screamed (purposefully).' (De Hoop and Narasimhan 2005:335)

- b. rām chīkh-ā
 Ram-NOM scream-PERF.SG.M
 ‘Ram screamed.’ (De Hoop and Narasimhan 2005:335)

In Nepali, I have not found any evidence that the ergative variant correlates with increased agency or volitionality. For some verbs of emission like “to cough,” ergative marking is optional.⁷ However, none of the Nepali speakers I consulted held the intuition that the ergative would be more common on (16a) rather than (16b).

- (16) a. sahuji-(le) (jāni.jāni) khok-nu bhayo
 shopkeeper-(ERG) (purposefully) cough-PERF.3.SG.HON
 ‘The shopkeeper coughed (purposefully).’ (Lindemann 2019:162)
- b. (ciso-ko karan-le) sahuji-(le) khok-nu bhayo
 (cold-GEN reason-INSTR) shopkeeper-(ERG) cough-PERF.3.SG.HON
 ‘(Because of a cold) the shopkeeper coughed.’ (Lindemann 2019:162)

Neither did any consultant consider agentivity or volitionality to be a factor in the usage of the ergative in any other context such as (5).⁸ In fact, the categorical proposition interpretation often correlates with a lesser degree of agentivity because agents have less control over more inherent and enduring properties. In the example of smoking in (12), the subject has less control over an addiction than over a casual habit.

Intuition (2) relates to those features of transitivity that have to do with the boundedness of the event or the individuation of the object, but not to the volitionality or agentivity of the transitive subject. I will argue in the next section that these represent distinct prototypical features of a transitive subject in an effective transitive event. This represents a point of typological variation among languages with ergative morphology.

5 Proto-roles and Causal Structure

A separate theoretical thread, beginning with Dowty’s (1991) formulation of Agent and Patient proto-roles, relates argument realization and case assignment to the prototypical features of the transitive subject and object. As with Hopper and Thompson’s conception of transitivity, proto-roles are cluster concepts of features that collectively define a prototypically transitive event in which one participant enacts an event that has a complete effect on another participant. The number and precise nature of these features vary under different frameworks and theories. Figure (2) compares the prototypical features of transitive subjects according to Dowty (1991), Næss (2004) and Fauconnier (2011).

The theories have in common a split between two different categories of features, which I have grouped under the headings of INSTIGATOR and EFFECTOR. The prototypical transitive subject is the initial and ultimate causer of the event, and therefore a volitional

⁷I consider such verbs to be underlyingly transitive in Nepali (Lindemann 2019:168).

⁸Ahearn (2001), in her study of letter writing and emerging courtship practices among young Nepali speakers in a traditional Magar language community, notes that the optional usage of the ergative emphasizes the agency of the writer. So there is evidence that ergativity is correlated with agentivity in at least one dialect of Nepali, perhaps as a result of language contact. But this does not appear to be a widespread feature of Nepali.

	INSTIGATOR	EFFECTOR
<i>Dowty (1991)</i>	VOLITIONALITY SENTIENCE/PERCEPTION	CAUSATION MOVEMENT
<i>Næss (2004)</i>	CONTROLLING	UNAFFECTED
<i>Fauconnier (2011)</i>	INSTIGATOR	AFFECTOR

Table 2: Properties of Prototypical Transitive Subjects

(human) agent: it is the INSTIGATOR of the event. Secondly, the prototypical transitive subject guides the event throughout its duration: it is the EFFECTOR of the event.

These feature clusters represent distinct and separable aspects of the event. In particular, transitive subjects are typically both Instigators and Effectors, while instruments are Effectors but not Instigators.⁹ Instruments are typically non-volitional and inanimate, and they are not the initial cause of the event, but they are the primary enactors of the action. This subset relation between the features of transitive subjects and instruments is related to the typologically robust phenomenon in which the morphological form of the ergative case is the same as the morphological form of the instrumental case. Crucially, the Nepali ergative and instrumental case markers are identical:

- (17) a. *shristi-le camcā-le bhāt uṭh-ā-yo*
 Shristi-ERG spoon-INSTR rice rise-CAUS-PERF.3.SG
 ‘Shristi picked up rice with a spoon.’ (Lindemann 2019:263)
- b. *bishnu siment-le/#kāmdā-haru-le/ ghar*
 Bishnu cement-INSTR/#worker-PL-INSTR house
ban-āu-dai-cha
 build-CAUS-CONT-PRES.3.SG
 ‘Bishnu is building a house using cement/#workers.’ (Lindemann 2019:263)

The Nepali clause can contain only one ergative subject but may also contain one or more instrument adjuncts, as in (17a). The ergative and instrumental case are distinguished grammatically in that verbal agreement is always with an ergative subject and never with an instrument, and instruments are obligatorily inanimate (17b). These are the properties of transitive subject arguments and oblique instrument arguments respectively.

Croft’s (2012) theory of causal structure unifies the two perspectives of argument proto-roles and prototypical transitivity. An event is schematized in terms of the transmission of force along a causal chain between participants. In (17a), as depicted in Figure (2), Shristi instigates an event by acting upon a spoon and causing it to pick up rice. Both the “Shristi” and “spoon” participants are antecedent to the event, and both are involved in effecting it. The “rice” participant is affected by, and is subsequent to, the event. These arguments are designated Subject, Object, and Antecedent Oblique according to a series of argument linking rules (Croft 2012:207).

Note that the *-le* postposition only marks antecedent arguments, either subjects or antecedent obliques. This postposition may also mark entire clauses to indicate that one clause

⁹This same notion is expressed by Dowty when he writes that the INSTRUMENT role has the properties [+CAUSATION, +MOVEMENT, -VOLITION, -SENTIENCE] (Dowty 1991:577).

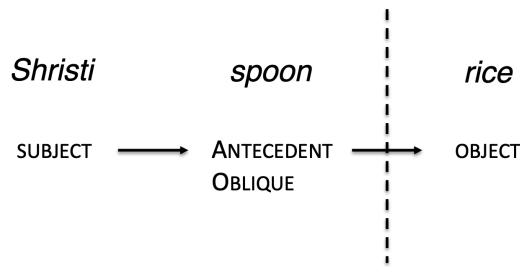


Figure 2: Participants in the Causal Chain of (17a), Adapted from (Croft 2012:214)

is a reason or cause of another clause. Butt and Poudel (2007) consider these reason clauses to be another form of the instrumental case:

- (18) [pāuna āu-na]-le ma timro bihā-mā jā-na
 [guest come-NON.FIN]-INSTR I your wedding-LOC go-NON.FIN
 pā-ina
 get-PERF.1.SG.NEG
 ‘Because of guests’ coming, I could not go to your wedding.’ (Butt and Poudel 2007:10)

The most parsimonious analysis of the *-le* postposition is that it marks an EFFECTOR of the event described by the clause. It has a single meaning whether it is found on a transitive subject, instrument, or clause: it entails that the given participant is involved in effecting the event described by the clause. It says nothing about whether or not the given participant is the instigator of the event. It may be, in which case the participant is a transitive subject. If not, the participant is an instrument.

In the historical development of Nepali, the *-le* postposition came to be incorporated into the split-ergative case patterning system. This occurred as the regular inflectional ergative case of Middle Indo-Aryan was phonologically reduced and nearly disappeared entirely.¹⁰ Nepali reinforced its ergative case with an invariant postposition, as did Hindi (Wallace 1982, Butt 2001, Poudel 2008). This particular postposition is well-suited for marking transitive subjects. As a marker of the effector of a clause, it already shares half of the properties of a transitive subject and, like the original ergative case, is associated with high transitivity.

6 Effector and Instigator Ergatives

Unifying the multiple usages of the *-le* postposition into a single EFFECTOR property provides an explanation for the set of intuitions described under Intuition (2). These are features that relate specifically to the completion of an effective transitive event, including perfective aspect and the individuation of the object. They do not include features related

¹⁰Its only vestige in modern Nepali is an irregular oblique form on certain pronouns and a few nouns. For example, *ma* is the nominative form of the first person singular pronoun, and *mai-le* is the ergative form.

to causing or instigating an event. The optional usage of the ergative emphasizes that the given subject referent is involved in enacting a transitive event (while saying nothing about whether or not it is the original cause of the event). The typical transitive subject already has both INSTIGATOR and EFFECTOR properties, so the addition of *-le* redundantly reinforces the EFFECTOR property. Thus optional ergative marking is pragmatically-conditioned: it does not change the truth conditions of the clause but rather guides discourse structure by drawing attention to the effector property of the subject. This can be interpreted as relating to the transitivity of the clause, and depending upon context to the individuation of the object or aspectual properties of the event. The semantic contribution of the ergative appears multifaceted and difficult to pin down precisely because it is a simple device that has many possible (but not unrestricted) interpretations.

This analysis shares some similarities with Holisky's (1987) analysis of optional ergativity in Tsova-Tush (Batsby). Holisky also distinguishes between two roles of the transitive subject that are equivalent to Instigator and Effector, but argues that the pragmatic usage of the ergative can target only the Instigator role. My analysis indicates that, in Nepali, the Effector role is targeted in opposition to the Instigator role.

This opens up a possible axis of variation among optional ergative languages. At the very least, optional ergative markers which emphasize the volitionality or agentivity of the subject referent must contain the INSTIGATOR property, whether or not they also contain the EFFECTOR property. More broadly, the marker itself may have subtle semantic properties that are separate from its participation in a structural case-marking system, particularly if it is isomorphic with other case markers. In Hindi, optional ergativity correlates with volitionality and thus presumably entails an INSTIGATOR property, and, unlike Nepali, there is no isomorphism with instrumental case.

I have argued that the other intuitions which I have grouped under Intuition (1) are not related to transitivity but rather result from the increased discourse prominence of the transitive subject element and its interpretation as the subject of a categorical proposition. The optional usage of the ergative draws attention to the transitive subject, which may be interpreted as either (a) emphasizing that the marked argument is the subject, or (b) emphasizing that it is the effector of the clause. The former interpretation is related to the observation in other OEM languages that the ergative variant is correlated with topicality, contrastive focus, surprise, or unexpectedness (Fauconnier 2011). The apparent mismatch between the two interpretations leads to intuitions that appear to be at odds with each other. This does not reflect a difference in grammars or semantic entries, but rather arises because the usage of the marker can have multiple possible motivations.

Ergativity is associated with many factors in OEM languages, including properties of the subject (animacy, volitionality, agentivity), properties of the event (telicity, perfectivity, individual-level predication), and properties of the discourse (focus, contrastive topic, unexpectedness). This analysis of the Nepali ergative illustrates how these factors ultimately arise from a small number of considerations: the semantic contribution of the marker, associated argument proto-roles, and the opposition between a marker and its absence. The analysis provides a schema for representing ergativity in languages where the case-marking of core arguments is determined by pragmatic factors.

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