

# Rigidity and Flexibility in the Ergative Splits of Nepali

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## Introduction

Split-ergative languages can be broadly categorized into two types: **Differential Subject Marking (DSM)**, in which the split is clearly conditioned by semantic or other grammatical factors, and **Optional Ergative Marking (OEM)**, in which the ergative marker may be present or absent without affecting the grammaticality of the clause (McGregor 2009). **Nepali** is a mixed system, typically described (Masica 1993) as having an aspectual split: ergative marking is **required** in the **transitive perfective** domain, and **optional** elsewhere, although Li (2007) notes that it is disallowed with certain intransitives and copulas. Additionally, Li proposes a second ergative split based on the semantics of the subject NP: inanimate subjects are obligatorily marked in all tenses and aspects.

	Transitive	Intransitive	Copulas
Imperfective	Optional	Unergative Unaccusative	Disallowed
Perfective	Obligatory		Disallowed

Figure 1: Hypothesized Ergative Patterning based on Aspect

## Methodology

Data come from the **Nepali National Spoken Corpus (NNSP)**, a collection of transcribed recordings of Nepali spoken during activities such as shopping and business meetings (Yadava et al 2008). For this study I analyzed four interviews of 67 minutes of total dialogue between fourteen speakers. Each utterance was separated by clause and coded for:

- 1 *Verb Type*: Transitive/Intransitive/Copula
- 2 *Verb Form*: Perfective/Imperfective
- 3 *Subject Case*: Nominative/Ergative
- 4 *Subject Type*: 1PRO/2PRO/3PRO/Animate/Inanimate
- 5 *Object Case*: Nominative/Accusative
- 6 *Object Type*: 1PRO/2PRO/3PRO/Animate/Inanimate

## Aspectual Split

	Perfective Trans	Imperfective Trans	Intrans	Copula
NOM Subject	8	22	221	479
ERG Subject	78	33	5	1
% ERG	<b>90.7%</b>	<b>60.0%</b>	<b>2.2%</b>	<b>0.2%</b>

Table 1: Ergative Marking based on Verb Form

As expected, ergative marking is heavily preferred in perfective transitive clauses, variable in imperfective transitive clauses, and generally disallowed in intransitives and copulas. Regarding the exceptions to the expected pattern:

- In Perfective Transitive clauses, 9% of the subjects are nominative (surprisingly high)
- In Intransitives (Perfective and Imperfective), only 2% of the subjects are ergative (surprisingly low)
- Only 0.2% of copulas contain an ergative subject, representing a nearly exceptionless categorical split

Even in the domain of variable case-marking we find that semantic factors effect the pattern of ergative marking. The difference between OEM and DSM in Nepali is that in regions of variable ergativity it is grammatical to deviate from the expected pattern, and doing so may correlate with discourse strategies such as topic-marking.

## Discussion of the Aspectual Split

- Native speakers categorically reject nominative subjects in perfective transitive clauses and ergative subjects with unaccusative intransitives and copulas.
- In rapid speech the ergative postposition may be unpronounced or more likely to be mistranscribed. The nominative is the zero form, which may explain why nominative exceptions are more common than ergative exceptions.
- The intransitive verbs which allow ergative marking (atelic unergatives, particularly activities like “dance” and verbs of emission like “bark”) are underrepresented in the dataset.

## NP Split

	1PRO	2PRO	3PRO	Anim	Inan
NOM Subject	13	0	0	4	1
ERG Subject	10	8	5	4	3
% ERG	<b>43.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>50.0%</b>	<b>75.0%</b>

Table 2: Ergativity based on Subject Type (Imperfective Transitive)

Focusing on Imperfective Transitive Clauses:

- For pronouns, there is a split between first person and second/third person subjects.
- For nouns, ergative preferred with inanimate reference, but there are exceptions.
- These results accord with a gradient interpretation of the Animacy hierarchy (Dixon 1994):  
1PRO » 2PRO » 3PRO » Proper » Animate » Inanimate
- However, Animacy and Person appear to be separate factors

## Discussion of the NP Split

- Native speakers are more likely to prefer ergative marking on nouns with inanimate reference and third person pronouns, but the judgments are not categorical.
- The effects of these semantic factors are gradient, and they are overridden by aspectual considerations (the Perfective split is primary).
- Demonstratives/inanimate third person pronouns may be an exception to the animacy generalization.
- We might expect Object Type to have an effect on ergative marking (whether it is elided, nominative, or accusative). But this does not appear to be the case.
- Perhaps the ergative is more common when the object outranks the subject in the hierarchy (rare in dataset)

## Conclusions

Both verbal aspect and NP animacy/definiteness affect the pattern of ergative marking in Nepali. However, the perfective split is primary and appears to be categorical, while animacy and person have a secondary and gradient effect. Together these factors represent the expected patterning of subject case marking. Deviation from the perfective pattern (by, say, using the nominative in a perfective transitive clause or an ergative with a copula) is simply judged to be ungrammatical. However, deviation from the NP split pattern is generally considered to be grammatical and may have a pragmatic effect. In the imperfective transitive clause, where Nepali patterns more like an OEM language and less like a DSM language, semantic considerations are flexible.

## Selected References

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