The Nepali Effector Ergative and Variation in Optional Ergativity

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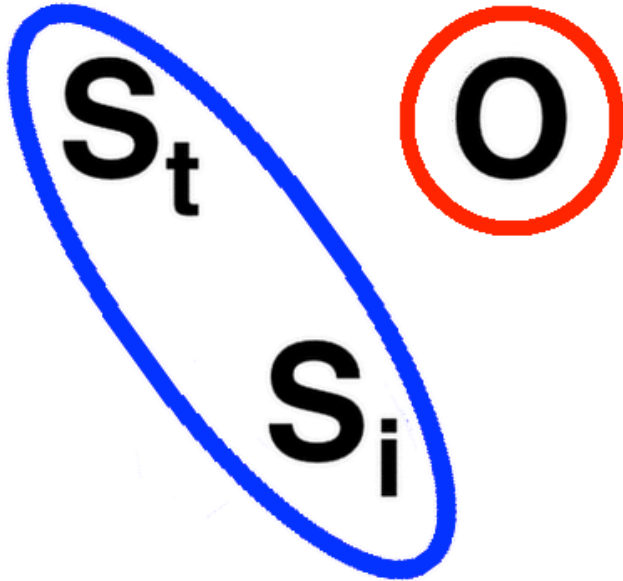Yale University
Yale Center for Medical Informatics
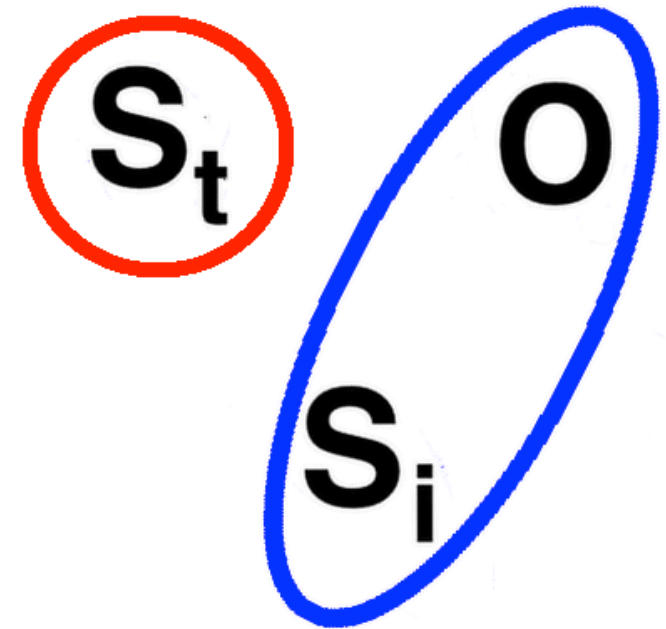February 15, 2020

Canonical Alignment Systems

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)

Split-Ergativity in Nepali

Ergative-accusative split conditioned by Perfective Aspect:

sitā-(le)　　　　　rām-lāi　　　　　dekh-chin
Sita.F-(ERG)　　　Ram-ACC　　　　see-PRES.3.SG.F
`Sita sees Ram.' [SB]

rām-le　　　　　carā　　　　　dekh-yo
Ram.M-ERG　　　sparrow　　　see-PERF.3.SG
`Ram saw a sparrow.' [SB]

Optional Ergative Marking

- Differential Agent Marking
  - Split according to semantic factors
  - Often: verbal aspect, animacy/definiteness of argument

- Optional Ergative Marking
  - Presence or absence of marker does not affect grammaticality of clause
  - Notoriously difficult to pin down pragmatic, contextual factors (Holisky 1987, Butt and Poudel 2007, McGregor 2010)

Methodologies

- Four converging Lines of Inquiry
  - Literature
  - Elicitation with Native Speakers
  - 2016 Acceptability Judgment Survey in Kathmandu
  - National Nepali Spoken Corpus Sample Analysis (Yadava et al 2008)

Roadmap

1. An Example of Conflicting Intuitions

2. Discourse Prominence

3. Transitivity and Proto-roles

4. Implications for OEM in Nepali

A Puzzle: Multiple Intuitions

rām   kām   gar-cha

Ram.NOM   work   do-PRES.3.SG

`Ram does/is doing/will do work.' [SB]

rām-le   kām   gar-cha

Ram.NOM-ERG   work   do-PRES.3.SG

`Ram does/is doing/will do work.' [SB]

Intuition 1:
Habitual interpretation

rām	kām	gar-cha
Ram.NOM	work	do-PRES.3.SG

`Ram is doing/will do work.' [SB]

rām-le	kām	gar-cha
Ram.NOM-ERG	work	do-PRES.3.SG

`Ram does work.' [SB]

- Associated with a habitual reading of the verb
- "emphasis" on subject (Grierson 1904, Clark 1963, Masica 1991)

Intuition 2:
Individuated Object Interpretation

rām   kām   gar-cha

Ram.NOM   work   do-PRES.3.SG

`Ram does work/is doing work.' [SB]

rām-le   kām   gar-cha

Ram.NOM-ERG   work   do-PRES.3.SG

`Ram is doing a job.' [SB]

- Ergative correlates with a specific interpretation of the object
- May be contradictory with previous interpretation
  - Is ERG or NOM used for an occupation?

Individual-Level Predication

- Butt and Poudel (2007): the ergative marks an **Individual-Level Predicate:** an enduring or inherent property of an individual (Carlson 1977)

- Disambiguates stage-level (future, present) and individual-level (habitual) interpretations of the simple present verb form

- However, ergative/nominative alternations are still present with unambiguous verb forms:

Individual-Level Predication

rām-(le)   kām   gar-**dai**-cha
Ram.NOM-(ERG)   work   do-**CONT**-PRES.3.SG
`Ram is doing work.' [SB]
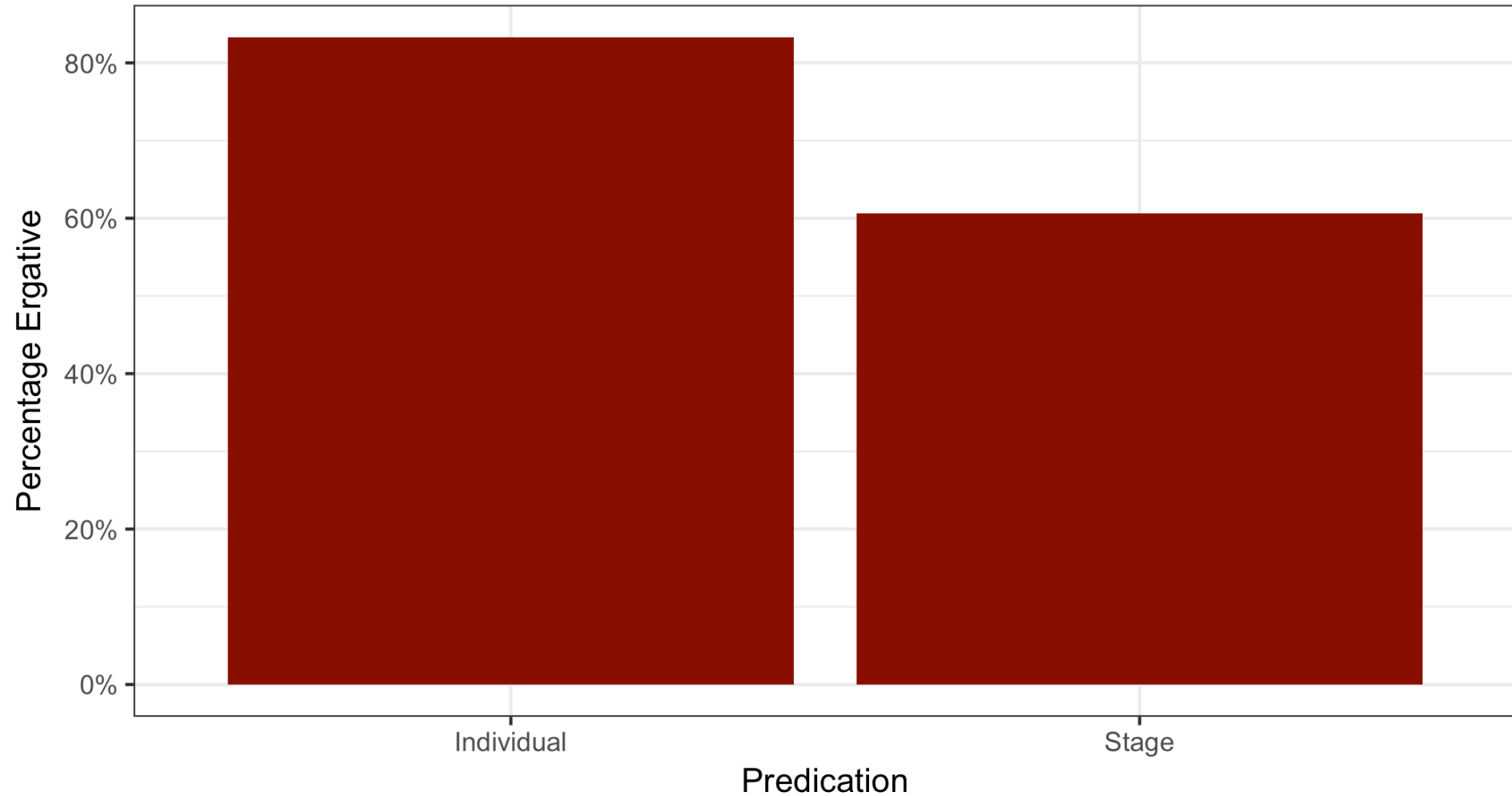
- Furthermore, in the simple present this more of a tendency than a categorical distinction:

Individual-Level Predication: Corpus Results

Corpus: SLP/ILP in Simple Present

Individual-Level Predication: Corpus Counter-examples

tei	laan-chu	hai	**mai-le**
that.EMPH	take-PRES.1.SG	PRT	**PRO.1.SG.OBL-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]

Discourse Prominence

- Kuroda (1972) on **Categorical Propositions**
  - First, directs attention to an element
  - Then predicates a property of an element

- Ergative is associated with increased discourse prominence

- (Non-categorical) correlation with: Topicality, individual-level interpretation (Ladusaw 2000), characterizing predicates:

Discourse Prominence

ma   curoṭ   khān-chu

PRO.1.SG.NOM   cigarette   eat-PRES.1.SG

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

mai-le   curoṭ   khān-chu

PRO.1.SG.OBL-ERG   cigarette   eat-PRES.1.SG

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

Discourse Prominence

- Why are there conflicting interpretations?

- In any optional case marking system:
  - The **marked form** is associated with **discourse prominence**
  - Topicality and DOM (Aissen 2003)

- But other intuitions arise from:
  - Ergative as a marker of a transitive event
  - Semantic contribution of the marker itself

Transitivity
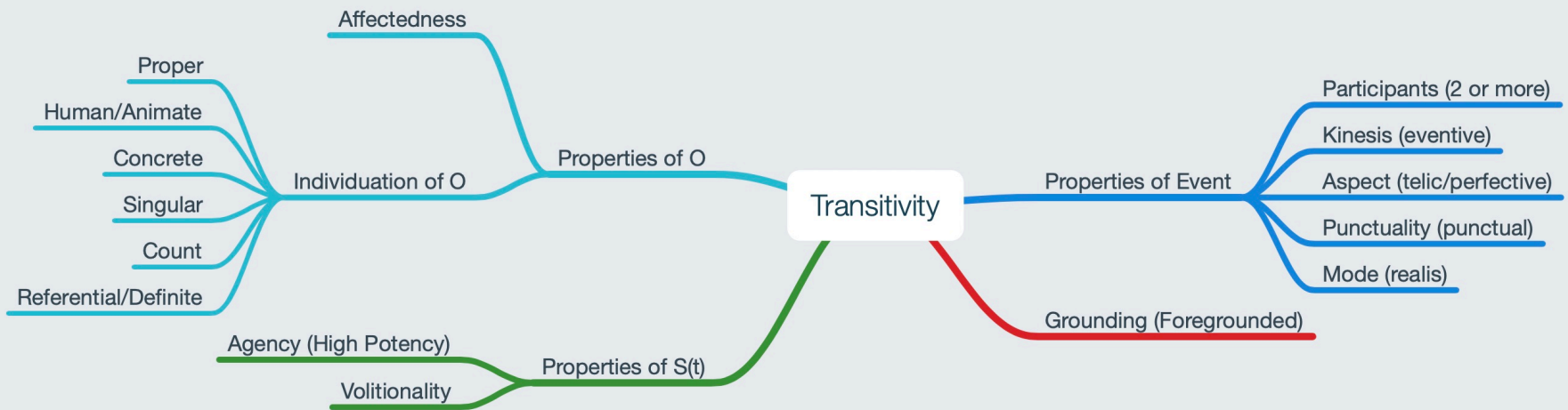
The Transitivity Hypothesis
Hopper and Thompson (1980)
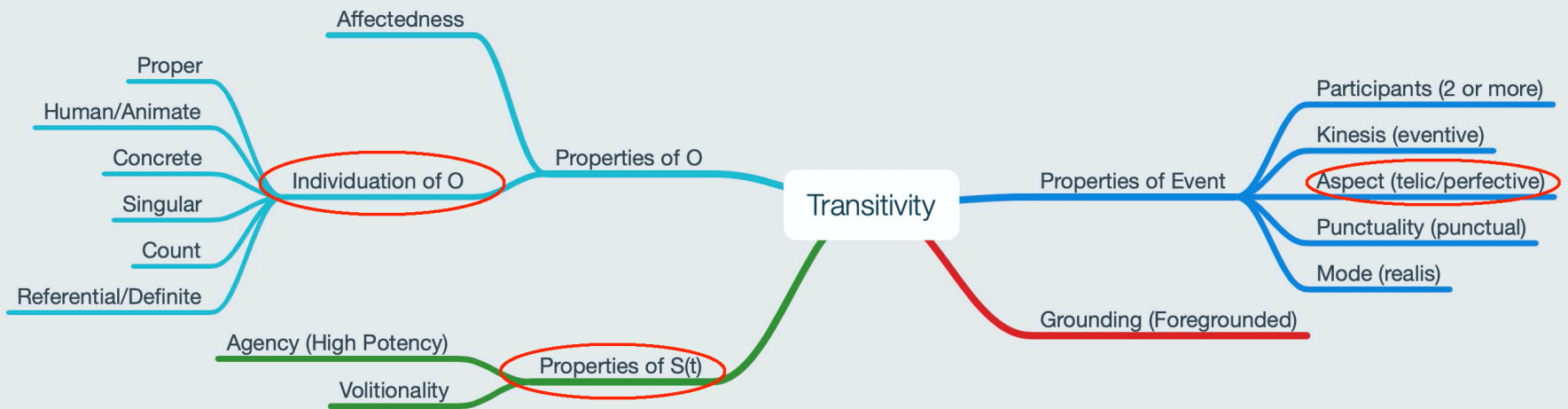
Transitivity

The Transitivity Hypothesis
Hopper and Thompson (1980)

Transitivity

- Erg/nom alternations correlating with Volitionality or Agency are found in many OEM languages (McGregor 2010), for example:

  - Dani (Foley 1986)
  - Tsova-Tush (Holisky 1987)
  - Hindi (Butt 2001)

Transitivity

- However, I find **no evidence for such Volitional alternations** in (Standard) Nepali:

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

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

Transitivity:
Argument Proto-roles

Prototypical Transitive Subject

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

Transitivity:
Argument Proto-roles

Prototypical Transitive Subject

Dowty (1991)	VOLITIONALITY	SENTIENCE/PERCEPTION	CAUSATION	MOVEMENT
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Fauconnier (2011)	INSTIGATOR		AFFECTOR	
	Instigator of Event		**Effector** of Event	

Transitivity

- Croft (2012): Transmission of Force along subevents of a **Causal Chain**

Sue	*hammer*	*coconut*	*Greg*
SUBJECT →	ANTECEDENT OBLIQUE →	OBJECT ------>	SUBSEQUENT OBLIQUE
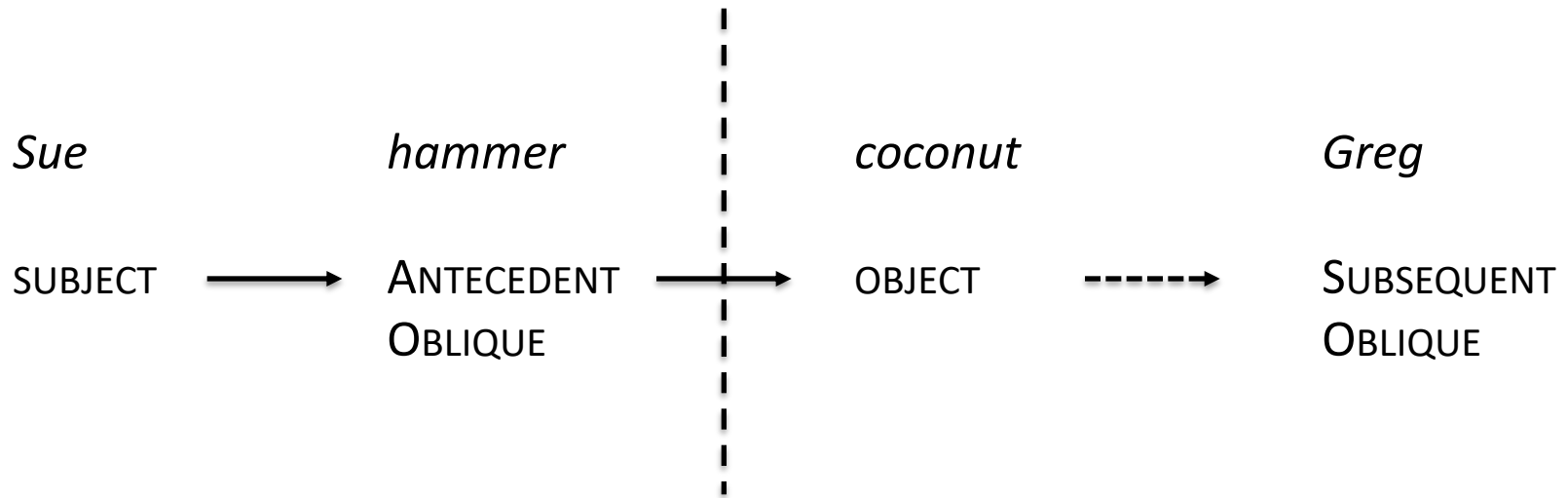
"Sue broke the coconut with a hammer for Greg."

Transitivity

Prototypical Transitive Subject

Instrumentals

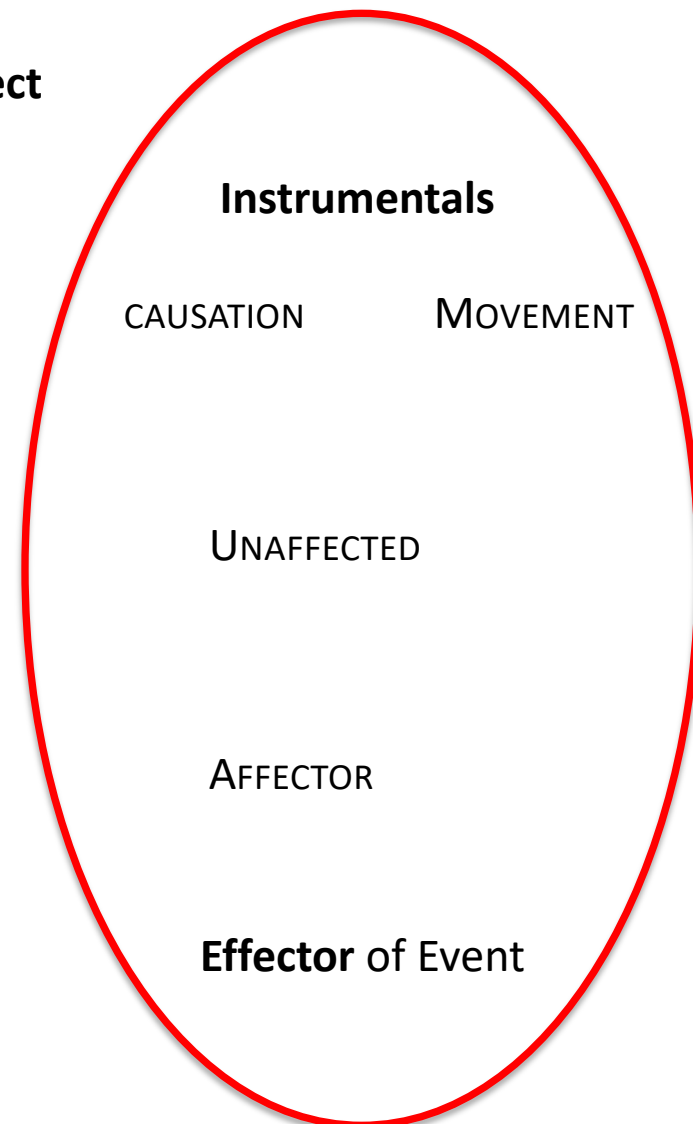|				
Dowty (1991)	VOLITIONALITY	SENTIENCE/PERCEPTION	CAUSATION	MOVEMENT
Næss (2004)	CONTROLLING		UNAFFECTED	
Fauconnier (2011)	INSTIGATOR		AFFECTOR	

Instigator of Event   **Effector** of Event

Effector Ergative

- The morphological form *–le* is associated with a single meaning:
  - It marks an **effector** of the event described by the clause
  - Not necessarily the **instigator** (although a prototypical transitive subject is both)

- As an Ergative Marker on transitive subjects

- On non-core arguments:

Effector Ergative

- On an **instrumental** (antecedent oblique) 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
`With milk (one) nourishes children.' [SB]

Effector Ergative

- 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)

Effector Ergative

- Holisky (1987) analysis of Tsova-Tush:
    - Transitive subject has AGENT and EFFECTOR semantic roles
    - Pragmatic usage of ergative emphasizes the AGENT role
    - Volitionality of Agent, Instigation of Event

- Nepali: Ergative marker emphasizes the EFFECTOR

OEM in Nepali

Conflicting intuitions may arise in optional case marking systems because they reflect different pragmatic strategies:

1. Impart discourse prominence to the subject

   Habitual/Characterizing Predicate Interpretation

2. Emphasize subject as effector of the event

   Individuated Object Interpretation

Thank you!

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Appendices

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)

Nepali Case Marking

Subject and Object Interpretations

- 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*

- On **modal constructions:**

rām-le/lāi ãã̃p   khā-nu   par-cha
Ram-ERG/ACC mango eat-NON.FIN need-PRES.3.SG
`Ram must eat mangoes.' [AG]

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

Ergatives and Instrumentals

- Ergatives and Instrumentals are homophonous in many languages (McGregor 2010)
  - Common Grammaticalization pathway INSTR-> 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

Another Intuition: Pronominal Restrictions

ma   kām   gar-cha

PRO.1.SG.NOM   work   do-PRES.3.SG

`I do/am doing/ will do work.' [SB]

#mai-**le**   kām   gar-cha

#PRO.1.SG.OBL-**ERG**   work   do-PRES.3.SG

#`I do/am doing/ will do work.' [SB]

- Ergative frequently on third person pronouns and proper names
- First person often feels stilted, but not quite ungrammatical…
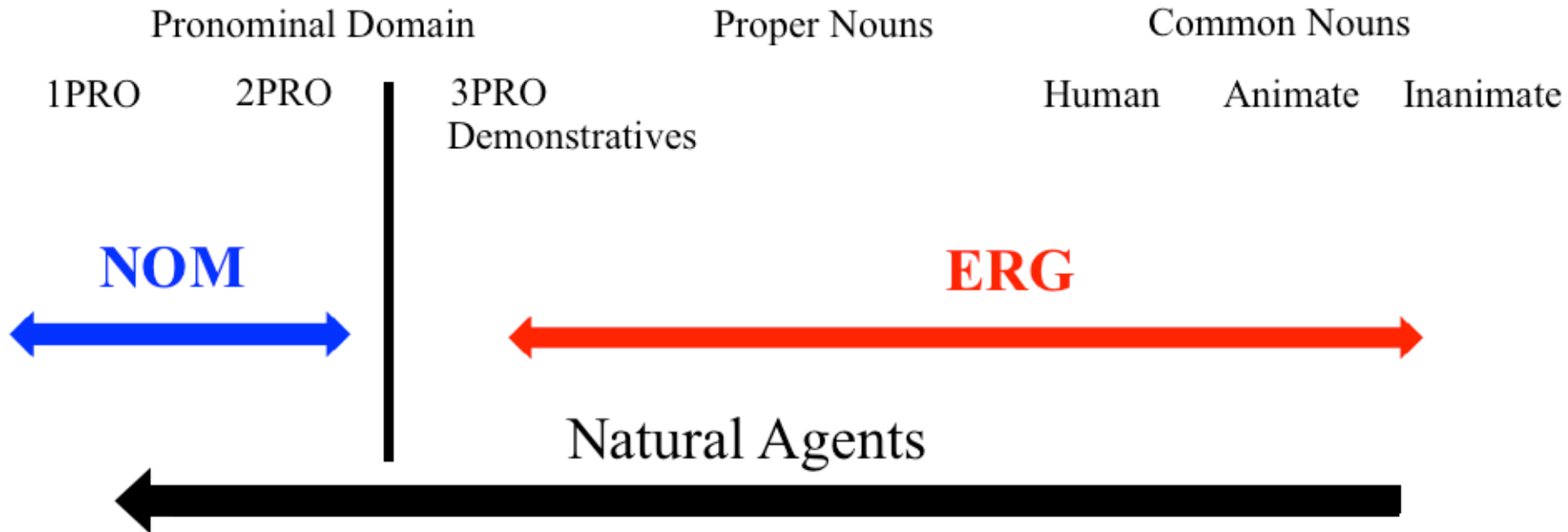
Nominal Hierarchy

Pronominal Domain   Proper Nouns   Common Nouns

1PRO   2PRO   3PRO   Human   Animate   Inanimate
Demonstratives
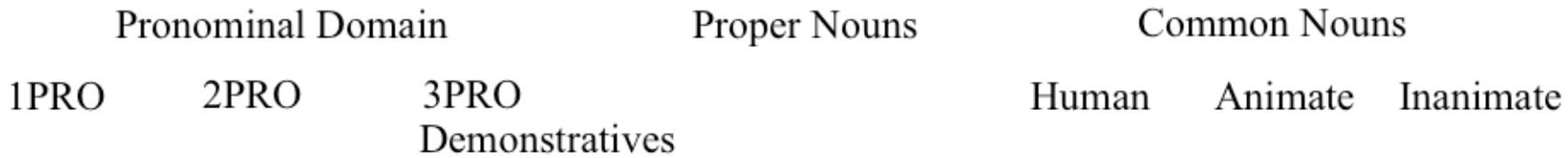
Natural Agents

Silverstein (1976); Dixon (1994)

Nominal Hierarchy: Marathi DAM

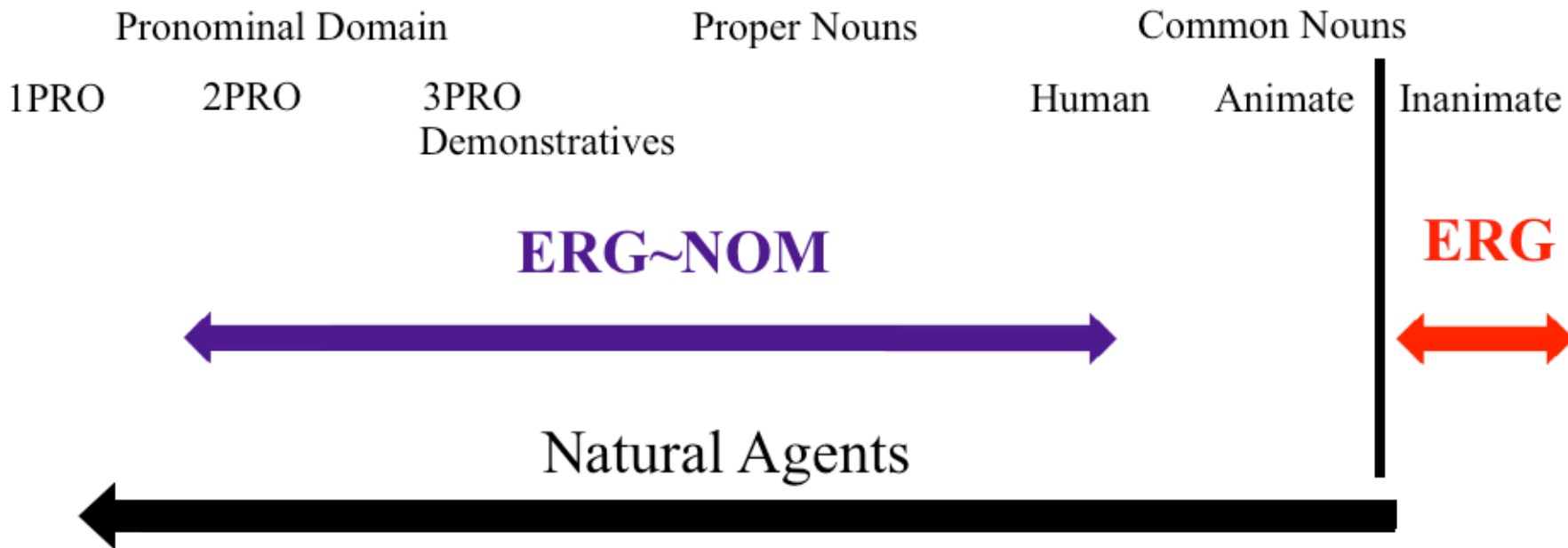Marathi Ergative Marking (Simplified)

Deo and Sharma (2006)

Nominal Hierarchy: Hindi DOM
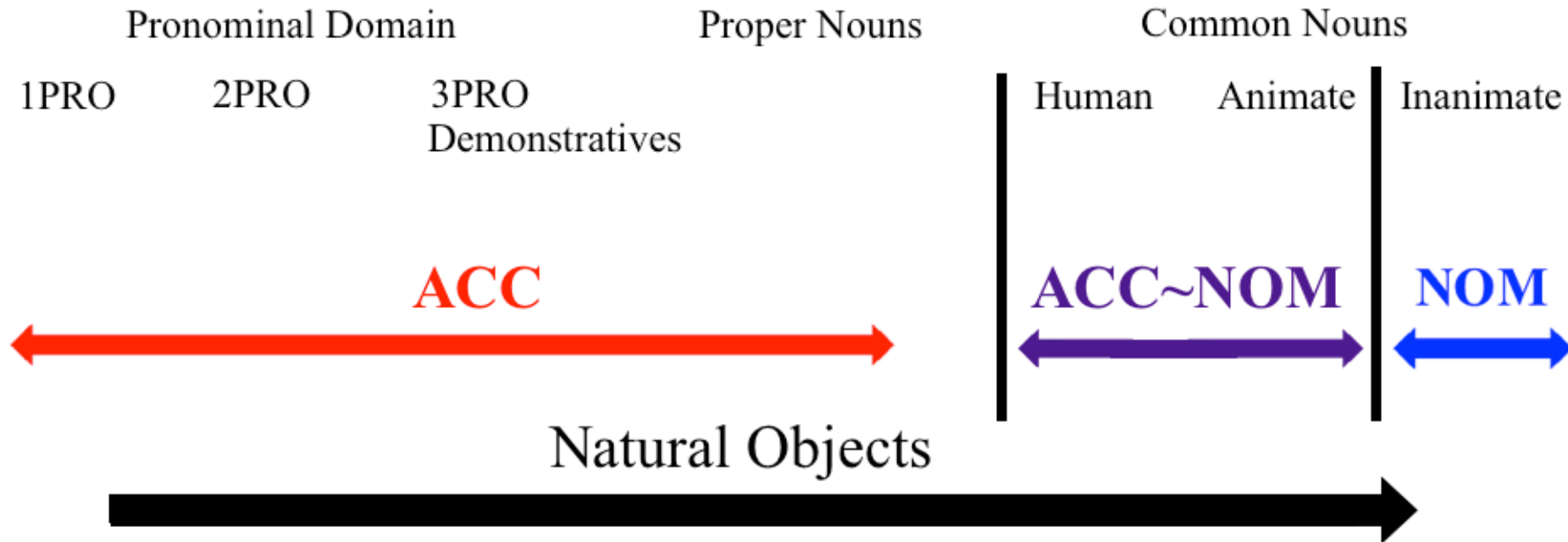
Hindi Object Marking (Simplified)

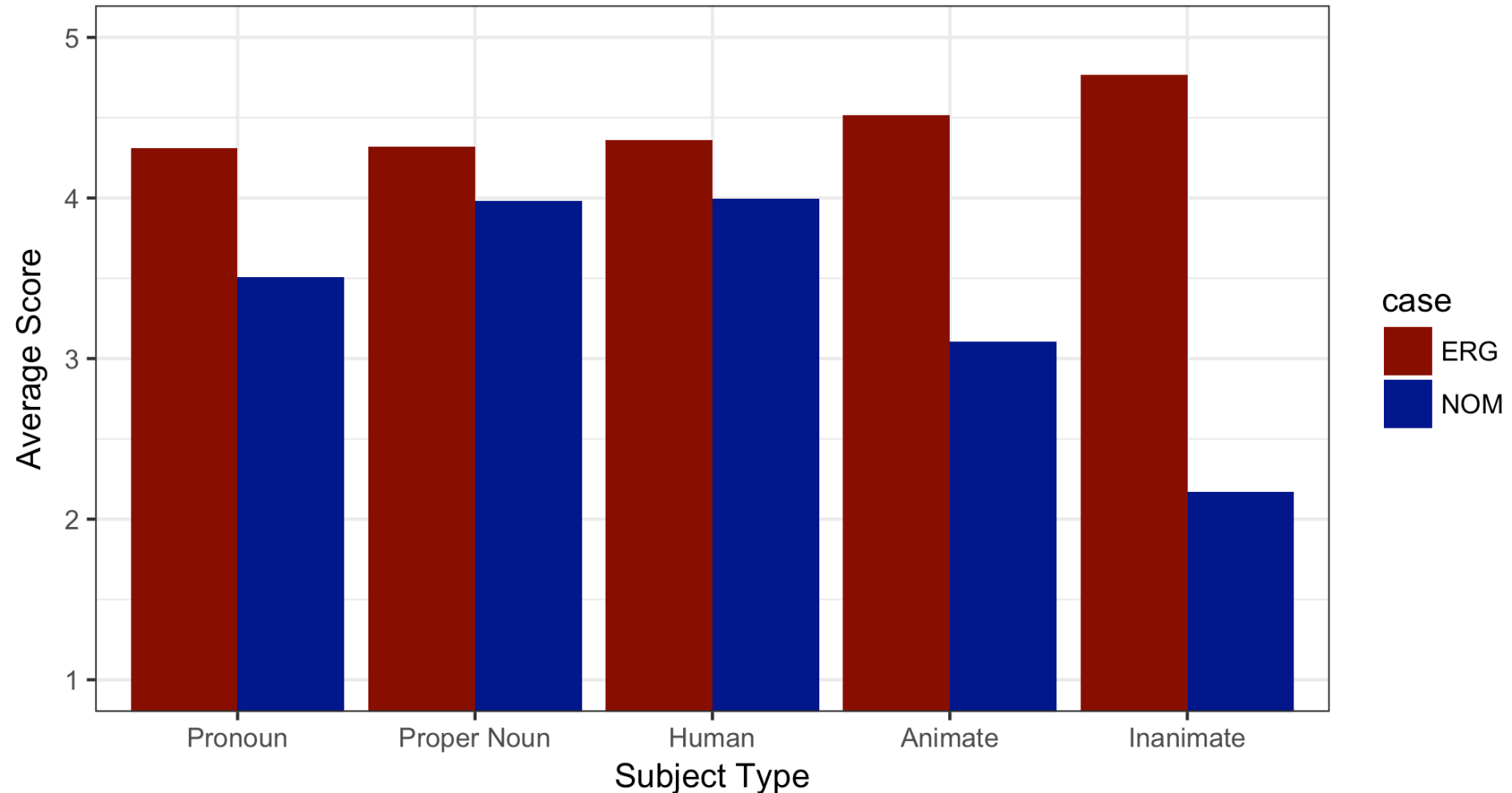Aissen (2003)

Nominal Hierarchy:
Nepali DAM

Nepali Ergative Marking

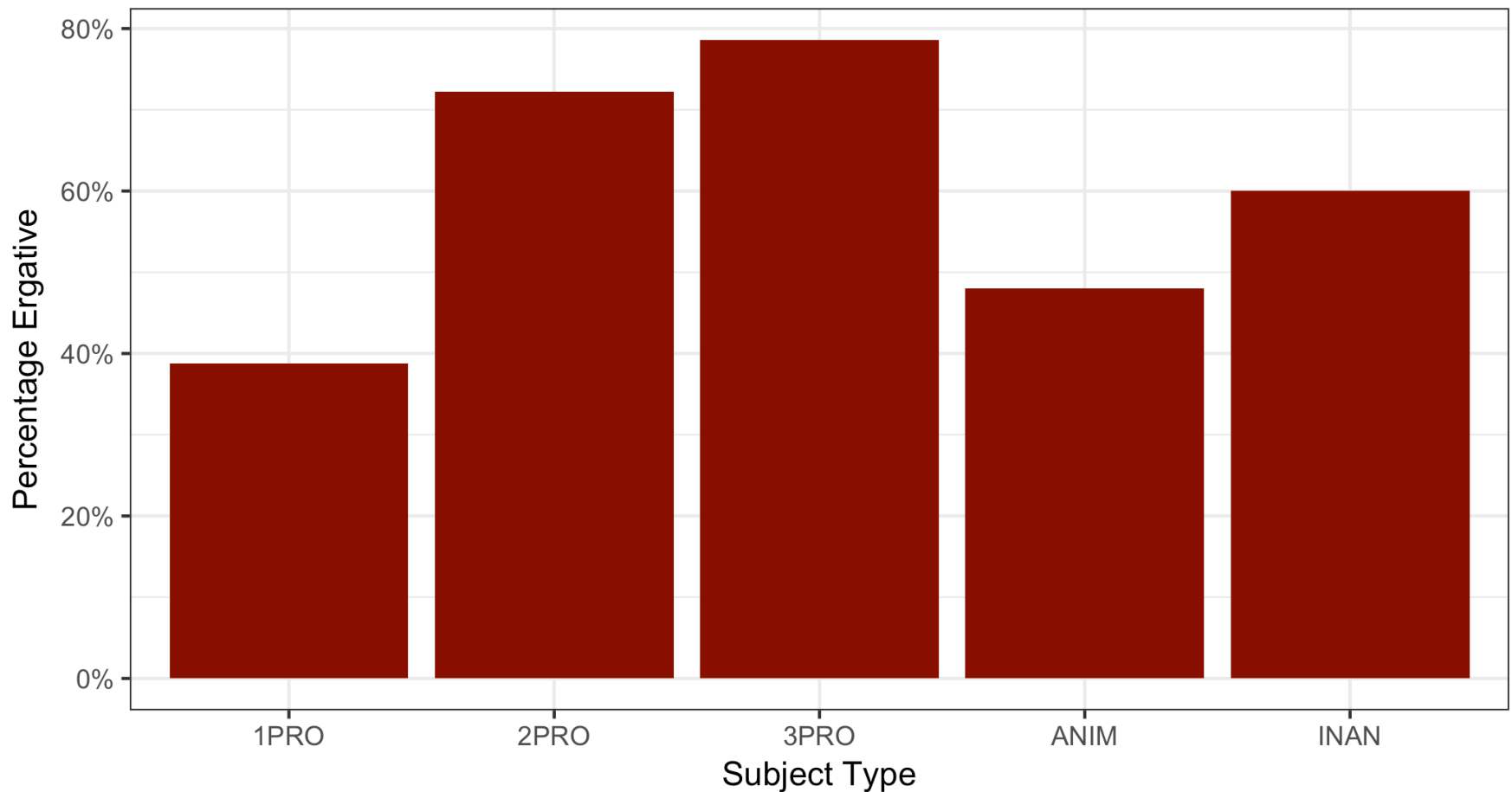Li (2007), others, (but contra Verbeke (2015), Pokharel (1998))

Nominal Hierarchy:
Nepal Corpus Results

Corpus: Ergativity by Subject Type

Nominal Hierarchy: Conclusions

- No categorical splits along a hierarchy but rather gradient tendencies based on two separate properties:
    - Animacy (inanimate vs. animate)
    - Locality (1PRO vs. Other)

- Possibly attributable to frequency:
    - 1PRO is the most common overt argument type in overt S_t: 46.6% (n=109)
    - Inanimate is the least common overt argument type in overt S_t: 5.9% (n=14)