CASE MARKING IN NUBRI

Cathryn Donohue

This paper introduces the case marking system in Nubri, using data from both Samagaun and Prok villages. Nubri, a Tibetan language, has ergative and dative morphological cases, but appears to have a dispreference for using morphological case where possible. This paper explores this issue, comparing the variations between the two dialects.

Keywords: case marking, Nubri, ergativity, morphological case

1 The Nubri language

The Nubri Valley is located in the upper Gorkha district of the Gandaki zone in the high Himalayas at the foot of Mount Manaslu in northern-central Nepal. Settled by Tibetans some 400 years ago, this *beyul*, or 'hidden valley' is home to the *Nubripa*, or Nubri people. Most Nubris speak the Nubri language, though in the Kutang area, Kuke is spoken, and in the more recently settled Samdo in the northwest, the villagers speak a language closely related to Kyirung Tibetan. There are also a number of people, who have moved to the Nubri Valley, and whose mother tongue may be altogether different (e.g. Gurung, Manange, etc.). While Tibetan remains the liturgical language and the language of traditional festivals, younger generations are increasingly using Nepali, even between themselves, as it is the language of the screen and contemporary songs, and a language symbolic of economic opportunity and modernity. Further, government health and education assistants assigned to the area typically do not speak Nubri resulting in widening domains of language attrition.

There are approximately 2000 people across the Nubri Valley (Simons &Fenig 2018), with 800-1000 of those located in Samagaun, the largest of the Nubri villages. There are reportedly 500 monolingual speakers of Nubri in the valley, though it is unclear how many of the 2000Nubri people speak primarily Nubri, and it is yet to determine the dialectical variations of the Nubri language systematically.Ethnologue reports four main dialects (Sama, Lho, Namrung and Prok), though it is universally accepted in the Nubri

valley that the dialect spoken in Samagaun is the most distinct from other varieties, which our fieldwork has confirmed. With the exception of a couple of short word lists, and a recently published lexicon (Dhakal 2018), Nubri remains undocumented.

The data presented here are primarily from the variety of Nubri spoken in Sama village and are based on fieldwork carried out by the author over six trips to Nepal during 2016-2018. The Nubri project started in 2016 together with Mark Donohue, and the data here builds on the foundational work carried out jointly.

2 Case systems

Our work on Nubri started out following typical elicitation methodology of translating sentences from English/Nepali/Tibetan into Nubri. In the initial stages, it appeared to be a typically ergative Tibetic language (e.g.Tournadre 2013). However, after collecting naturalistic discourse of varying kinds (conversation, narratives, pear story recounts from several speakers, real-time pear story narratives etc.), it has become clear that case marking is rarely used and that case is not preferred in general.

However, Nubri does have two structural cases: ergative (-*gi/yi*) and dative (-*la*),prototypicallymarking the transitive subject and indirect object. Examples of some prototypical predicates are given below.

(1) a. nga   zei   yin
         1.SG   eat   AUX
         'I ate.'

     b. nga   shau   zei   yin
         1.SG   apple   eat   AUX
         'I ate the apple.'

     c. nga-i   shau   zei   yin
         1.SG-ERG   apple   eat   AUX
         'I ate the apple.'

Both (1b) and (1c) are considered grammatically correct, but the sentence without the ergative case

marking (1b) is what is commonly found in natural discourse.

The dative case is prototypically found on the recipient argument ('indirect object') in a verb such as 'send', illustrated in (2) below.

(2) mo   kuttshap-la   yige tang   so
3SG.F ambassador-DAT letter send PRF.
'She sent a letter to the ambassador.'

Note that it is less commonly found, but not ungrammatical to have the ergative case marking the agent in the sentence in (2) as in (2′) below.

(2′) mo-yi   kuttshap-la   yige tang so
she-ERG ambassador-DAT letter send PRF.
'She sent a letter to the ambassador.'

Related Tibeto-Burman languages have shown a complex of contexts that may affect the presence of the ergative case (e.g. Bumthang, Donohue & Donohue 2016), so we may anticipate that the tense/aspect of the event, the affectedness of the object, or the volitionality of the subject, may influence the presence of the ergative case but this seems not to hold true in SamaNubri as illustrated in (3). In (3a) and (3b) show that changing the aspect of the clause from progressive to perfective does not result in the ergative case marker. (3b) and (3c) show that the telicity of the event neither forces the use of the ergative case and (3d) and (3e) show that forcing a highly volitional subject does not result in the use of the ergative case marker.

(3) a. o   magyen di   chörpi tup nu
DET woman DET cheese cut PROG
'The woman is cutting the cheese.'

b. o   magyen chörpi tup   so
DET woman cheese cut   PRF
'The woman cut the cheese.'

c. mo   chörpi yölu tup   so
3SG.F cheese some cut   PRF
'She cut some of the cheese.'

d. o   magyen dzöl-ne   chörpi tup
DET woman accidentally cheese cut
so
PRF
'The woman cut the cheese accidentally.'

e. o   magyen chörpi kang tsu-ne tup so.
DET woman cheese deliberately cut PRF
'The woman cut the cheese deliberately.'

The dative case is morphologically identical to the semantic use of the dative, used to mark locative or allative arguments as shown in (4).

(4) a. bõ   sha   so
girl   go   AUX
'The girl went.'

b. bõ   lungpa-la   sha   so
girl   village- DAT   go   AUX
'The girl went to the village.'

However, occasionally it is used to mark the 'object' of a transitive verb. It is this particular usage of the dative case that I will focus below.

3 On the variable use of the dative case

While the use of the ergative marker in Sama Nubri is sparse, core objects of a number of transitive verbs bear the dative case. Consider the examples in (5).

(5) a. mo   shel   tup   so.
3SG.F glass   cut   PRF
'She cut the glass.'

b. shel   mo-la   tup   so.
glass   3SG.F-DAT   cut   PRF
'The glass cut her.'

In (5a) we see that there is no case marking on either the subject (*mo*) or the object (*shel*), while in (5b), the object is marked with the dative case, *-la*.

It is striking that in (5a), the subject 'she' is a good prototypically agentive animate noun phrase and the object is a good prototypically inanimate noun phrase, while in (5b) the reverse is true.

This is in line with the animacy hierarchy, first proposed by Silverstein (1976) for explaining morphologically split ergativity in Australian languages. The examples in (6) show an extreme opposite of a highly animate subject coupled with an inanimate object in the (a) example, then the reverse in the (b) example. In this instance of 'animacy reversal' we find the object marked by the dative case.

(6) Animacy hierarchy relevant for Nubri

Highest	*First/Second*	*person*
pronouns		
↑	*Third person pronouns*	
|	*Nouns with human referents*	
↓	*Nouns with animate*	
referents		
Lowest	*Nouns with inanimate referents*	

The case marker can be omitted when the canonical word order, SOV, is adhered to, and there is a clearly suitable 'subject' candidate, such as 'glass' as a cause of the cutting event in (7).

(7) shel   mo   tup   so.
    glass   3SG.F   cut   PRF
    'The glass cut her.'

Once a non-canonical word order is introduced (for discourse reasons), the case marker is used, as shown in (8) below.

(8) a. mo-la   shel   tup   so.
       3SG.F-DAT   glass   cut   PRF
       'The glass cut her.'

    b. *mo   shel   tup   so.
        3SG.F   glass   cut   PRF
       'The glass cut her.'

The examples in (8) show us that non-canonical order is possible when the object bears the dative case, but not possible without case on the object, as the ungrammaticality of (8b) shows.

However, the relative animacy heirarchy of the participants does not always change the case marking in transitive verbs. In the examples in (9–11) we see that the objects of 'hit' always bear the dative case, as the (b) examples show.

(9) a. mo   yak-la   zhü   so.
       3SG.F   yak-DAT   hit   PRF
       'She hit the yak.'

    b. *mo   yak   zhü   so.
        3SG.F   yak   hit   PRF

(10) a. mo   kho-la   zhü   so.
        3SG.F   3SG.M-DAT hit   PRF
        'She hit him.'

     b. *mo   kho   zhü   so.
         3SG.F 3SG.M   hit   PRF

(11) a. yak   mo-la   zhü   so.
        yak   3SG.F –DAT hit   PRF
        'The yak hit her.'

     b. *yak   mo   zhü   so.
         yak   3SG.F   hit   PRF
        'The yak hit her.'

It has been reported that, in classical Tibetan, the dative case may be used to mark objects depending on the nature of the verb: objects of change of state verbs, such as 'kill' or 'cut' do not bear case, while those of verbs involving surface contact (such as 'hit') are marked with *la* (DeLancey 2003:259). It is similarly true in Nubri that the verb 'hit' marks its object with *la*, although the verbs with the semantic feature of change of state behave differently.[1]

Verbs of contact have been identified as a group that requires objects to bear case in related languages (e.g. Classical Tibetan, DeLancey 2003:259). This holds true for many verbs in Nubri such as 'hit' as we saw in (9-11), but it is also used across the board for a verb like 'look at' as shown in (12).

(12) a. mo   yak-la tei   so.
        3SG.F   yak-DAT look.at:PRF   PRF
        'She looked at the yak.'

     b. mokho-la   tei   so.
        3SG.F 3SG.M-DAT look.at:PRF   PRF
        'She looked at him.'

     c. yak   mo-la   tei   so.
        yak   3SG.F-DAT look.at:PRF   PRF
        'The yak looked at her.'

One type of verb such as 'see' shows some variation in the case marking consistently related to the (relative) animacy of the arguments as shown by the absence of a case marker in (13a) and the presence of a case marker in (13b).

(13) a. mo   khi   tung   so.
        3SG.F   dog   see   PRF
        'She saw the dog.'

     b. khi   mo-la   tung   so.
        dog   3SG.F-DAT   see   PRF
        'The dog saw her.'

The whole paradigm of interactions of different animate subjects and objects as arguments of the

verb 'see' is given in Table 1, which assumes clauses with canonical SOV word order. Non-canonical word order requires case marking of the object. With a verb like 'see' there can be no inanimate subjects, hence the missing row.

Table 1: Object marking with 'see' in Sama Nubri

OBJ \ SUBJ	Local person	3rd person	Human	Animate	Inanimate
Local person	la	(la)	–	–	–
3rd person	la	la	(la)	–	–
Human	la	la	la	(la)	–
Animate	la	la	la	la	–
Inanimate	*n/a*	*n/a*	*n/a*	*n/a*	*n/a*

The selective use of the object marker with 'see' is clearly determined by properties of the arguments participating in the event. There are several interesting points to note from Table 1:

i.   If the animacy of the subject is lower than that of the object, the object must bear case;

ii. If the animacy of the subject and the object are equal, then the object bears case;

iii. Objects in clauses with higher animate subjects do not typically bear case but may optionally bear case if the object is just one 'step' less animate than the subject.

4 Dialectal variation of object marking

The Nubri language is quite different at the other end of the valley in many ways, including case marking patterns. Focusing on case marking for now, in the Prok variety of Nubri, as in Sama, we have verbs such as 'hit' and 'look at' that uniformly mark objects with the dative case, but we do also find variations with verbs like 'see' as shown in Table 2, again assuming canonical word order. While similar, this is crucially different from SamaNubri. What we see here is a general non-preference for non-human referents to be marked with case. Further, even in equal animacy contexts non-pronominal referents typically do not bear case except in the case of animacy

reversal, then human objects bear case. Moreover, while case is required on local objects in clauses with third person pronominal subjects (animacy reversal), case is optionally allowed on all other pronominal objects.

Table 2: Object marking with 'see' in Prok Nubri

OBJ \ SUBJ	Local person	3rd person	Human	Animate	Inanimate
Local person	(la)	(la)	–	–	–
3rd person	la	(la)	–	–	–
Human	la	la	–	–	–
Animate	la	la	la	–	–
Inanimate	*n/a*	*n/a*	*n/a*	*n/a*	*n/a*

5 Concluding remarks

This paper is the first to report on case marking in Nubri. With a focus on Sama Nubri, I show that the use of case is not just sparse, but interestingly controlled in its variation which crucially relies on the type of verb, word order, and the relative animacy hierarchy of the two arguments. I also show that the Prok variety of Nubri is quite different to Sama Nubri.

Such variability in case marking data provide challenges to theories of case which assume that case marking is fixed and assigned on purely structural facts. These data suggest that minimally the animacy of the noun phrase arguments must be taken into consideration for at least a subset of the verbs, in order to correctly understand how case marking is assigned in Nubri.

References

DeLancey, Scott. 2003. Classical Tibetan. in G. Thurgood and R. LaPolla (eds), *The Sino-Tibetan Languages*. London: Routledge. pp. 255-269

Dhakal, Dubi Nanda. 2018. *A Nubri Lexicon*. Munich: Lincom Europa.

Donohue, Cathryn, and Mark Donohue. 2016. Onergativity in Bumthang. *Language* 92.1: 179-188.

Silverstein, Michael. 1976. Hierarchy of features and ergativity. In R.M.W.Dixon (ed.) *Grammatical Categories in Australian Languages*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, pp. 112-171.

Simons, Gary F. and Charles D. Fennig (eds). 2018. *Languages of the world, 21st edition*. Dallas, TX: SIL International. Online version http://www.ethnologue.com

Tournadre, Nicolas. 2013. The Tibetic languages and their classification. In T. Owen-Smith and N. Hill (eds), *Trans-Himalayan Linguistics*. Mouton: De Gruyter. pp. 105-130.

Acknowledgements

---

[1] Note that the verb for 'hit' *zhü* requires its subject to be volitional, so it is not possible to check a sentence where the subject and object are both inanimate. Instead a different verb is used which requires its subject to be a non-volitional causer of the event.