

# THE SYNTACTIC PROFILE OF NEPALI ERGATIVITY

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*Ergative case-marking in Nepali is syntactically shallow even compared to other Indo-Aryan languages. The structure of ergative case-marking in Nepali is examined in the context of structural, inherent, and dependent theories of case assignment, and in particular Legate's typology of inherent case and the Marantz Case Generalization, and it is determined that a dependent case theory best describes the Nepali pattern.*

**Keywords:** Nepali, Indo-Aryan, ergativity, case assignment, syntax

## 1. Introduction

Modern linguists first began to study ergativity as a unified phenomenon following Dixon's (1972) monograph on Dyirbal, and during most of that decade ergativity was primarily studied through a functional-typological lens. During the following two decades, syntacticians of all theoretical persuasions began to take interest in ergative languages (DeLancey, 2004, p. 1). For formal syntacticians in the generativist tradition, ergative patterning provided a challenge to the traditional understanding of case theory derived from Government and Binding Theory (Baker & Bobaljik, 2017). This has led to a substantial theoretical literature on the nature of ergativity as a syntactic phenomenon.

The purpose of this article is to examine Nepali ergativity within the various generativist theories of ergative case assignment in order to determine the nature of Nepali ergativity within the overall typology of ergativity in the world's languages, and ultimately to demonstrate that it is best understood as a purely morphological phenomenon.

Nepali is a Northern Zone Indo-Aryan language spoken in Nepal, Bhutan, and India (Hammarström et al. 2018). Nepali presents with a complex case-marking pattern in which ergative case is obligatory in perfective transitive clauses, disallowed in unaccusative intransitive clauses, and varies with the nominative elsewhere.

The data for this analysis come primarily from recordings and elicitations with speakers of a "standard" prestige dialect of Nepali spoken in Kathmandu (see Lindemann, 2019, p. 32 for details). There is substantial dialectal variation within Nepali and among the related Pahari languages (Grierson, 1904, Poudel, 2020), including the variant expression of ergativity, and the pattern described here is just one among a milieu of ergative case-marking patterns in Indo-Aryan (Deo & Sharma, 2006, pp. 376-380).

Our primary focus is on those domains in which ergative case-marking is either grammatically obligatory or disallowed, and therefore could plausibly be considered a strictly syntactic (or morphological) phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

In part two, it is demonstrated that Nepali ergativity is shallow because it is not found in those grammatical domains where it would be expected in a syntactically ergative language: as a syntactic pivot in subordinate clauses, or in adjectival or verbal agreement. Ergative patterning is thus restricted to the domain of nominal case morphology.

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<sup>1</sup> In the imperfective, ergative marking is typically "optional," meaning that it is conditioned by a fascinating array of semantic and pragmatic considerations (Abadie 1974, Butt and Poudel 2007, Li 2007, Lindemann 2019). A full syntactic description of Nepali would need to characterize nominative/ergative variation in the imperfective domain.

Part three details three major theories of ergative case assignment: structural, inherent, and dependent. Nepali does not follow the pattern of structural case assignment because ergative marking appears to be independent of the clause. For inherent case, Legate's (2012, pp. 181-182) diagnostics indicate that it may be considered an

ABS=DEF language, although it does not fit neatly into this typology. Nepali does straightforwardly follow Marantz' Case Generalization, suggesting that Nepali ergative case may be best described as a dependent case.

## 2. Syntactic and morphological ergativity

Ergative patterning in a language may be present at one level of structure and not another. Ergative morphology like the Nepali ergative postposition (*-le*) may or may not correspond to ergative patterning at the syntactic level. The question, as articulated by Anderson (1977), is whether ergativity in a given language is syntactically "deep" or "shallow." Anderson argues that ergativity is relatively superficial in most languages. Anderson's perspective is a historical one, in which ergative morphology can be thought of as a fossilized relic of an earlier form of the language; a syntactic construction (such as the passive) is reanalyzed and morphologically reappropriated without a substantial effect on the underlying syntax.

### 2.1 Agreement

Nepali has a completely nominative-accusative verbal agreement pattern. The Nepali verb agrees uniformly with the subject (whether  $S_i$  or  $S_o$ ) regardless of whether  $S_i$  is case-marked ergative or nominative. In this respect Nepali differs from nearly every other Indo-Aryan language with ergative case-marking morphology, which exhibit some form of object agreement in perfective clauses (Deo & Sharma 2006, pp. 376-380).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Nepali did exhibit object agreement in earlier stages of its historical development (Wallace 1982). In shifting from the historical pattern of mixed agreement to the universal subject agreement of the modern language, Nepali has followed a similar pathway to that of

- (1)
- |    |                      |                  |   |
|----|----------------------|------------------|---|
| a. | $m\Lambda$           | $b^{\text{h}}at$ | $k^{\text{h}}an-\widehat{ts}^{\text{h}}u$ |
|    | I.NOM                | rice             | eat-PRES.1.SG                             |
|    |                      |                  | 'I eat rice.'                             |
| b. | $m\Lambda\dot{i}-le$ | $b^{\text{h}}at$ | $k^{\text{h}}a-\ddot{e}$                  |
|    | I.OBL-ERG            | rice             | eat-PERF.1.SG                             |
|    |                      |                  | 'I ate rice.'                             |

The absence of ergative-absolutive verbal agreement in Nepali is evidence that ergativity is constrained to a relatively small part of the grammar of the language.

### 2.2 Ergativity and subjecthood

The common syntactic diagnostics to test for the subjecthood are reflexivization, coordination, and control (Keenan 1985). In some ergative languages, such as the Pama-Nyungan language Dyirbal, these diagnostics pattern along ergative-absolutive lines. In other words, a particular diagnostic will group together  $S_o/O$  (absolutive) against  $S_i$  (ergative).

However, for other ergative languages, these diagnostics pattern along nominative-accusative lines despite the presence of ergative case-marking. Anderson 1977 notes that this is the case for Hindi, and below we demonstrate that it is true for Nepali as well.

#### 2.2.1 Reflexivization

Reflexive pronouns in Nepali are coreferential with the subject of the clause. The general form of the reflexive pronoun in Nepali is *ap<sup>h</sup>u*.

- (2)
- |    |                      |                      |   |
|----|----------------------|----------------------|---|
| a. | $m\Lambda$           | $ap^{\text{h}}u-laj$ | $dek^{\text{h}}-\widehat{ts}^{\text{h}}u$ |
|    | I                    | self-ACC             | see-PRES.1.SG                             |
|    |                      |                      | 'I see myself.'                           |
| b. | $m\Lambda\dot{i}-le$ | $ap^{\text{h}}u-laj$ | $dek^{\text{h}}-\ddot{e}$                 |
|    | I.OBL-ERG            | self-ACC             | see-PERF.1.SG                             |
|    |                      |                      | 'I saw myself.'                           |
| c. | * $m\Lambda-laj$     | $ap^{\text{h}}u-le$  | $dek^{\text{h}}-\ddot{e}$                 |
|    | I-ACC                | self-ERG             | see-PERF.1.SG                             |
|    |                      |                      | *'Myself saw me.'                         |

(Lindemann, 2019, p. 237)

modern Bangla (Verbeke 2011). Nepali ergativity was syntactically deeper earlier in its history.

For both examples (2a) and (2b), the reflexive pronoun must be coreferential with the subject of the sentence. This is true whether the subject is unmarked, as in the imperfective clause in (2a), or marked ergative, as in the perfective clause in (2b). This represents a nominative-accusative alignment pattern in the syntax which differs from the morphological expression of the ergative marker (-le).

If ergativity were syntactically deep, we would expect (2c) to be grammatical: a reflexive pronoun in a transitive perfective clause would be coreferential with the object (*ma-lai*).

Another reflexive pronoun is the genitive *ap<sup>h</sup>no*, and it too must be coreferential with the subject of the clause.

- (3) ram ap<sup>h</sup>no meṯs-ma baṯ-yo  
 ram self.GEN chair-loc sit-PERF.3.SG  
 ‘Ram sat in his (Ram’s) chair’  
 (Lindemann, 2019, 238)

In a transitive clause, *ap<sup>h</sup>no* must be coreferential with the S<sub>t</sub>, indicative of an accusative pattern, rather than with the O, which would be indicative of an ergative syntactic alignment. In (4), the reflexive pronoun is coreferential with the ergative subject (*Vijay*) rather than the accusative object (*Ram*).

- (4) viḍzai-le ram-lai ap<sup>h</sup>no meṯs-ma  
 Vijay-ERG Ram-ACC self.GEN chair-LOC  
 baṯ-a-yo  
 sit-CAUS-PERF.3.SG  
 ‘Vijay seated Ram in his (Vijay’s) chair’  
 (Lindemann, 2019, p. 239)

## 2.2.2 Coordination

As noted by Wallace (1982, 1985), Nepali allows coordination between clauses when the subject is ergative in one clause and nominative in the other:

- (5) [ aɟa eɟdam kʌbaɟi pu lʌga-era ]  
 [ today very trashy PRT wear-CONJ ]  
 a-eko ts<sup>h</sup>u ke maɟi-le  
 come-PRES.PERF.1.SG what I.OBL-ERG  
 ‘Today I came here wearing trashy (clothes).’  
 (Lindemann 2019, p. 239)

- (6) tʌpaɟi-le [ tyo ḍzasto ḍzʌŋgal wak  
 you.HON-ERG [ that how jungle walk  
 jʌ-dak<sup>h</sup>eri ] bag<sup>h</sup> dek<sup>h</sup>-nu b<sup>h</sup>a-eko ts<sup>h</sup>a  
 go-while ] tiger see-PRES.PERF.HON.3.SG  
 ki ts<sup>h</sup>aɟina ?  
 or COP.PRES.3.SG.NEG ?  
 ‘Have you ever, going on that jungle  
 walk, seen a tiger?’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 239)

In the first example, the subject of both clauses is the speaker. The outer clause is an unaccusative intransitive, requiring nominative case, and the inner clause is perfective and transitive, allowing an ergative. The (postposed) overt subject is ergative, and coordinates both clauses. In the second example, the outer clause is perfective and transitive, requiring an ergative subject, while the inner clause is unaccusative, requiring a nominative subject. The ergative subject coordinates both clauses.

The referentiality between S<sub>i</sub> and S<sub>t</sub> in multiple clauses, whether they carry absolutive or ergative morphological case, is indicative of a nominative-accusative syntactic pattern.

## 2.2.3 Control

The third subject diagnostic is that of subject coreference with control. In a matrix clause that takes a subordinate clause as a complement of the VP, the subject is coreferential with the syntactic subject of the subordinate clause.

- (7) keṯa-le [ kukur-lai hirk-au-na ]  
 boy-ERG [ dog-ACC hit-CAUS-INF ]  
 k<sup>h</sup>oḍz-yo  
 seek-PERF.3.SG  
 ‘The boy tried to beat the dog.’  
 (Lindemann 2019, p. 240)

The NP “boy” is coreferential with the deleted S<sub>t</sub> of the subordinate clause rather than the O of the subordinate clause. It is ungrammatical for the syntactic subject to be coreferential with the O of the subordinate clause:

- (8) \*kukur-le [ keṯa-lai hirk-au-na ]  
 dog-ERG [ boy-ACC hit-CAUS-INF ]  
 k<sup>h</sup>oḍz-yo

seek-PERF.3.SG

\*‘The dog tried to get the boy to beat him.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 240)

For all three of these subject diagnostics, Nepali picks out  $S_t$  and  $S_i$  as the subject regardless of morphological case marking, suggesting that ergativity in Nepali is relatively shallow.

### 2.3 Lack of oblique case on adjectives

Deo & Sharma (2006, pp. 379-380) present evidence for ergative patterning in Marathi adjectives even when ergative marking is not overt (as in first and second person pronouns). Adjectives that modify the subject show oblique marking that indicates that the subject is covertly ergative. This is evidence that ergativity has a deeper structural component in that language. As Marathi is a related Indo-Aryan language, it is worth investigating whether this is true for Nepali as well.

Nepali has a similar oblique inflection on adjectives. In the past, nouns like *keṭo* ‘boy’ would also inflect with an oblique case in the plural or when case-marked by ergative (*keṭa-le*), accusative (*keṭa-lai*), or genitive (*keṭa-ko*). Today this distinction is not always followed, and *keṭa* may be used in all cases. Even at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Grierson observed that “the oblique and direct forms are used interchangeably” (Grierson, 1904, p. 23).

(12) a. sano keṭa baḥhira ṭs<sup>h</sup>A  
small boy outside COP.3.SG  
‘The small boy is outside.’

b. sana keṭa-haru baḥhira ṭs<sup>h</sup>AN  
small.OBL boy-PL outside COP.3.PL  
‘The small boys are outside.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 243)

The adjective *sano* (“small”) modifies the subject, and when the subject is plural, as in (12b), it takes an oblique inflection (*sana*). Accusative case-marked objects also trigger oblique inflection:

(13) maḷi-le sana keṭa-lai dek<sup>b</sup>-ē  
I.OBL-ERG small.OBL boy-ACC see-PERF.1.SG  
‘I saw a small boy.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 243)

However, according to my respondents, ergative-marked subjects do not trigger oblique inflection:

(14) sano k<sup>h</sup>eṭa-le āp k<sup>h</sup>a-yo  
small boy-ERG mango eat-PERF.3.SG

‘The small boy ate a mango.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 244)

This indicates that ergative case-marking does not have a deep effect on the syntactic structure of the clause.

To summarize the discussion so far, ergative case-marking may be syntactically deep or shallow. As with other Indo-Aryan languages, Nepali subjecthood diagnostics of reflexivization, coordination, and control pattern along nominative-accusative lines, suggesting that ergativity is relatively shallow.

In fact, ergativity in Nepali is shallow even in comparison with other Indo-Aryan languages: ergative case-marking does not trigger verbal agreement with the object, as it does in Marathi and Hindi, nor does it trigger oblique inflections on adjectives that modify the ergative subject.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Theories of case assignment

Within the tradition of generative syntax, there are three basic ideas about how ergative case is assigned. Ergative case marking may be considered a structural case, an inherent case, or a dependent case.

In structural case assignment, ergative case is assigned by the head of a tensed clause. In inherent case assignment, ergative case is assigned locally in its base-generated position. These first two theories presume the existence of a separate abstract case which is assigned in the syntax and is realized (perhaps imperfectly) by the available morphological structure. For dependent case theories, ergative is morphological in nature, and is assigned based on the presence of another noun within the verb phrase.

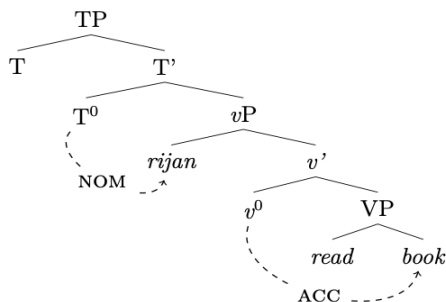
<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Nepali subjecthood and its challenges for Relational Grammar and Government & Binding Theory, see Wallace (1985).

### 3.1 Structural case

Bobaljik (1993) and Laka (1993) are structural analyses of ergative case. Structural case is assigned based on the position of the argument within the syntactic structure of a clause.

Most structural case theories of ergative-marking argue that ergative case is assigned by the Tense head in the same way that nominative case is assigned in a nominative-accusative language. This is an illustration of the sentence “Rijan reads a book” in a nominative-accusative language.

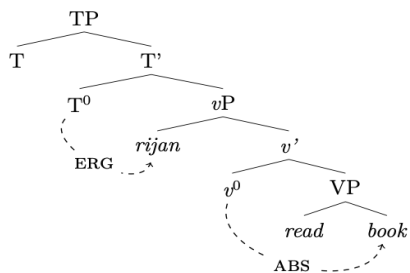
#### (15) Structural case assignment in a nominative-accusative language



The external argument “Rijan” receives nominative case from  $T^0$  (perhaps after moving to subject position at T), and the internal argument “book” receives structural accusative case from  $v^0$ . The assignment of nominative case is structural because it is assigned by a clause head ( $T^0$ ) rather than a head in the verb phrase.

Similarly, a structural theory of ergative case posits that ergative case is assigned by  $T^0$ . The internal argument is assigned absolutive case by  $v^0$ .

#### (16) Structural case assignment in an ergative-absolutive language



Structural case is assigned by virtue of the argument being in a particular syntactic position, rather than by carrying a particular thematic role or being associated idiosyncratically with a particular verb.

If ergative case is structural, then it should be possible to disassociate ergative case from its semantic role. Laka (2006, p. 375) argues that ergative case is structural in Burushaski because the agent of a transitive clause is assigned ergative case, while the agent of an intransitive (unergative) is assigned absolutive case.

In Nepali, the picture is less straightforward. Ergative case-marking is required or optional on certain unergatives and disallowed on others, which may have more to do with the lexical semantics of the verb than the structural position (Li 2007, Lindemann 2019).

- (17) keṭa-le k<sup>h</sup>ok-jo  
 boy-ERG cough-PERF.3.SG  
 ‘The boy coughed.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 74)

- (18) neta lumbini-ma gajo  
 leader Lumbini-LOC go.PERF.3.SG  
 ‘The politician went to Lumbini.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 163)

In any case, Legate (2012, p. 182) criticizes the assumption that ergativity must be structural simply because transitive and intransitives behave differently. For example, a transitivity restriction may also be found on datives for some languages in which dative case is not structural.

Another feature of structural case is that an argument may be assigned different cases depending upon the larger syntactic structure of the clause (Baker & Bobaljik, 2017, p. 3). A particular argument may change case within the larger syntactic structure.

This contrasts with other case assignment theories, for which case is assigned only to an argument in its original position, and so there will not be case alternations in different syntactic environments.

As a general rule, Nepali ergative case is unaffected by the syntactic environment. This suggests that ergative case in Nepali is not structural.

For example, accusative, nominative and ergative case marking is available to arguments in nonfinite clauses. The fact that ergative marking is possible in nonfinite clauses suggests that ergativity cannot be structural. Structural ergativity is assigned by the T-head which would be absent in nonfinite clauses.

- (19) [  $\Lambda$ nu-le aus<sup>h</sup>adi na-kinn-undzel ]  
 [ anu-ERG medicine NEG-buy-until ]  
 sut-dina  
 sleep-PRES.3.SG.NEG  
 ‘Until Anu buys medicine she will not sleep.’

In general, the ergative marker is not affected by the nature of the clause. In purposive clauses like the following, there is obligatory subject control, and there can be an ergative-nominative mismatch:

- (20) a. [  $\Lambda$ nu sutna ]-laj g<sup>h</sup>ar gayi  
 [ anu sleep ]-ACC house go.PERF.3.SG.F  
 ‘Anu went home in order to sleep.’  
 b.  $\Lambda$ nu-le [ sutna ]-laj aus<sup>h</sup>adi kinn-in  
 anu-ERG[sleep]-ACC med. buy-PERF.3.SG.F  
 ‘Anu bought medicine in order to sleep.’  
 (Lindemann 2019, p. 249)

The same is true for nominalized clauses:

- (21) [ hidzo a-eki ketji ]-le  
 [ yesterday come-PERF.3.sg.f girl ]-ERG  
 kitab lek<sup>h</sup>-eki ts<sup>h</sup>e  
 book write-PERF.3.SG.F COP.3.SG.F  
 ‘The girl who arrived yesterday wrote a book.’  
 (Lindemann 2019, p. 249)

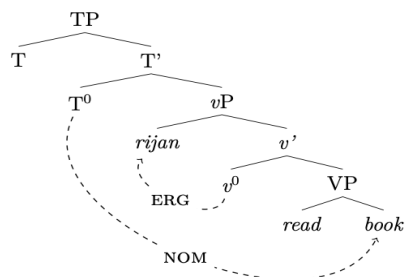
In Nepali, ergative marking is available in many different syntactic environments, including untensed clauses, which indicates that it is not a structural case.

### 3.2 Inherent case

Inherent case analyses of ergativity include Woolford (1997), Laka (2006), and Legate (2008, 2012). Inherent case is assigned locally to an

argument in its base-generated position. This position may be associated with a particular thematic role, such as an agent thematic role being generated in the specifier of vP.

- (22) Inherent case assignment in an ergative-absolutive language

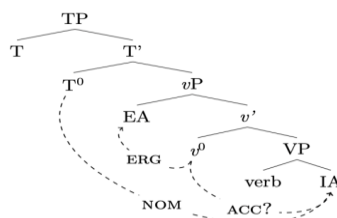


Ergative case is assigned to the external argument (“*Rijan*”) by  $v^0$  to its specifier, where the external argument of a transitive clause originates.

The distinction between structural and inherent case is a feature of the Principles-and-Parameters syntax model, and the distinction has carried over into subsequent models including the Minimalist Program (Laka, 2006, p. 375). It arises from the observation that case and semantic function (semantic role) are not equivalent, and in many languages it is necessary to distinguish between (a) structural case that is assigned to an argument by virtue of it being in a particular syntactic position, (b) case that is always associated with a particular thematic role, and (c) case that is assigned idiosyncratically by the verb. These latter two are examples of inherent case.

Legate (2008)’s inherent case analysis of ergativity accounts for some of the differences that we see in ergative languages by appealing to the morphological interpretation of inherent case.

- (23) Legate’s theory of inherent case



Nominative case is assigned structurally by T to the highest available argument. Ergative case is assigned by the *v* head to the external argument (EA) in base position. So the external argument of an unergative intransitive will get ergative case if there is no transitivity restriction, otherwise they will get nominative case. The internal argument of an unaccusative will get nominative case.

In Legate's typology there are two kinds of ergative languages, ABS = NOM languages and ABS = DEF (also called ABS = NOM & ACC) languages.

Under this framework, absolutive is not a separate case. Rather, the morphological manifestation of inherent case leads to the appearance of an ergative-absolutive pattern. The only difference between the two types of languages is that for ABS = NOM languages the *v* head assigns structural accusative case to the internal argument (IA), and for ABS = DEF languages it does not.

For ABS = NOM languages, absolutive case is just nominative case assigned by the *T* head, which searches down and assigns nominative case to the internal argument (IA). Because the *v* head does not assign accusative case, the internal argument is available to get nominative case.

For ABS = DEF languages, the *v* head always assigns accusative case to the internal argument. However, there is no morphological expression of accusative case, and the IA is left unmarked. Thus the nominative S<sub>i</sub> and the (accusative) O are both unmarked.

Legate (2012, pp. 181-182) develops five diagnostics for distinguishing between the two systems: accusative morphology, caseless DPs, nonfinite contexts, multiple absolutives, and agreement.

### 3.2.1 Accusative morphology

Legate's ABS = DEF requires that nominative and accusative case marking have the morphological (unmarked) form. Therefore, such a language will not have overt accusative case marking. This appears to be the case for Nieuwe, Enga, and Warlpiri. Hindi has a system of marking direct and indirect objects that is similar to Nepali, which Legate considers to be dative marking. In

fact, both Hindi and Nepali require this case marker on indirect objects, but it is variable on direct objects.

If we make the same assumption that the Nepali case marker (*-laj*) is not a marker of accusative structural case, but rather an inherent dative case marker, then accusative case is morphologically unmarked in Nepali. This diagnostic indicates that Nepali, like Hindi, could be ABS = DEF.

### 3.2.2 Caseless DPs

If absolutive is the morphological default, then it should be found in constructions in which no abstract case features are assigned to a DP. Legate gives the example of hanging-topic left-dislocation, which is found in Hindi and Nepali. The hanging topic is not given any abstract case marking:

- (24) tjo keʃi tes-le timi-laj  
 that girl 3.PRO.OBL-ERG you-ACC  
 dek<sup>h</sup>-i  
 see-PERF.3.F.SG  
 'That girl, did she see you?'

(Lindemann 2019, p. 256)

According to my respondent, it is not possible for there to be ergative case marking on *tjo keʃi* ('that girl') which suggests that the absolutive form is the default. The absolutive form is also the only form available when the hanging topic is coreferential with an accusative-marked O, as in (25a), or an S<sub>i</sub>, as in (25b).

- (25) a. tjo keʃi taj-le  
 that girl 2.PRO.OBL.LOW-ERG  
 dek<sup>h</sup>-is us-laj  
 see-PERF.2.SG.LOW 3.PRO.OBL-ACC  
 'That girl, did you see her?'

- b. tjo keʃi u aja  
 that girl 3.PRO today  
 aek<sup>h</sup>-i ho  
 come-PERF.3.F.SG COP  
 'That girl, did she arrive today?'

(Lindemann 2019, p. 256)

This again follows the prediction for ABS = DEF languages.

## 3.2.3 Nonfinite contexts

For ABS = DEF languages,  $S_i$  and O have a different abstract case, even though the morphological expression of that case is the same.  $S_i$  is nominative, and O is accusative. This makes a prediction for nonfinite contexts: absolutive on S should be unavailable because there is no finite T head, but absolutive on O should remain available. Legate demonstrates that this is indeed the case for Hindi nominalized clauses, in which absolutive on S becomes unavailable.

For ABS = NOM languages, Legate predicts that neither O nor S should be available in nonfinite contexts, and this is true in Georgian, for which the genitive is required in both contexts.

Nepali, unlike either of these patterns, shows no restrictions for  $S_i$  or O in nominalized nonfinite clauses:

- (35) a. [ timi-laj̄ dek<sup>h</sup>-eko keʈi ]  
 [ you-ACC see-PERF girl ]  
 bʌhira ts<sup>h</sup>e  
 outside COP.3.SG.F  
 ‘The girl who saw you is outside.’
- b. [ timi-le dek<sup>h</sup>-eko keʈi ]  
 [ you-ERG see-perf girl ]  
 bʌhira ts<sup>h</sup>e  
 outside COP.3.SG.F  
 ‘The girl who you saw is outside.’
- c. [ timi-laj̄ dek<sup>h</sup>-eko keʈi ]  
 [ you-ACC see-PERF girl ]  
 kitab lek<sup>h</sup>-i  
 book write-PERF.3.SG.LOW.F  
 ‘The girl who saw you wrote a book.’
- d. [ timi-le dek<sup>h</sup>-eko keʈi ]  
 [ you-ERG see-PERF girl ]  
 kitab lek<sup>h</sup>-i  
 book write-PERF.3.SG.LOW.F  
 ‘The girl who you saw wrote a book.’  
 (Lindemann 2019, p. 258)

So this diagnostic does not appear to capture the Nepali patterning. I was unable to find any other type of nonfinite clause in which there are restrictions on case.

## 3.2.4 Multiple absolutives

Because the realization of  $S_i$  and O as absolutive is the same, for ABS = DEF languages, it is possible to have multiple absolutive arguments in the same clause. The facts for Hindi and Nepali are quite similar here. In a verb with imperfective aspect, it is possible for a clause to have multiple absolutives. In other words, there is differential ergative marking on the subject and differential object marking on the object, and these are independent of each other:

- (36) ram hʌrek din euʈa  
 ram every day one.CT  
 āp k<sup>h</sup>an-tʂ<sup>h</sup>ʌ  
 mango eat-PRES.3.SG  
 ‘Ram eats a mango every day.’  
 (Lindemann 2019, p. 258)

This contrasts with Georgian, in which accusative marking and ergative marking are in complementary distribution such that clauses with two absolutives are not possible.

So this diagnostic also suggests that Nepali is an ABS = DEF language.

## 3.2.5 Agreement

Finally, Legate distinguishes between agreement patterns for ABS = DEF languages and ABS = NOM languages. Some ABS = DEF languages allow agreement with the (ergative-marked)  $S_i$ , and some do not. But they should not allow agreement with O. Thus the prediction is that for ABS = DEF languages agreement should be with  $S_i$  and O or just  $S_i$ . For ABS = NOM languages, the O is assigned nominative case, so there should be agreement with  $S_i$  and O.

Hindi does in fact have O agreement when  $S_i$  is ergative and O is unmarked. Legate explains this as “aggressive agreement,” such that *T* looks for something to agree with when nothing else is available. However, this argument is less tenable in other Indo-Aryan languages which presumably show ABS = DEF characteristics. In Gujarati, for example, there is O agreement even when O is case-marked (Deo and Sharma 2006: 73).



Nepali, with its straightforward  $S_t / S_i$  agreement, falls into the expected ABS = DEF category. Although Legate's third diagnostic does not appear to capture the Nepali pattern, the others indicate that Nepali, like Hindi and other split-ergative languages, may be considered an ABS = DEF language with inherent ergative case.

### 3.3 Dependent case

Marantz (1991) argues that accusative and ergative case both constitute dependent cases. This theory is further developed in Coon (2013), Baker (2015), and Baker and Bobaljik (2017).

Dependent case is assigned to one of the arguments in a VP on the condition that another argument is present in the same clause. Therefore, ergative and accusative case may only be assigned in transitive clauses. If case is assigned to the lower argument of the VP, then it is accusative case. If case is assigned to the higher argument, then it is ergative case.

Dependent case is entirely morphological, so there is no abstract syntactic case assignment. Dependent case will be assigned separately from the overall syntactic structure after the assignment of lexical cases (cases that are assigned idiosyncratically by particular verbs).

In proposing a dependent case analysis for the ergative, Marantz (1991) makes a strong prediction about the inability of internal arguments to obtain ergative case:

Ergative case generalization: Even when ergative case may go on the subject of an intransitive clause, ergative case will not appear on a derived subject. (p. 13)

An example of a derived subject is the argument of an unaccusative intransitive. The argument of an unaccusative, which is typically a theme, is presumed to originate as the internal argument of a VP and move up to subject position (Perlmutter 1978).

Marantz' generalization predicts that even languages which allow ergative marking on unergatives will disallow it on unaccusatives and any other derived subject. This makes sense in a dependent case analysis, because ergative case is assigned to the higher of two arguments in base

position, and the theme argument is at the lower position. For languages which allow ergative marking on unergative accusatives, a dependent case analysis may argue that there is in fact a covert internal argument. But an unaccusative should not be able to get ergative case.

The Marantz ergative case generalization is a natural consequence of an inherent case analysis as well. Ergative case should be unavailable to derived subjects because they do not originate in the external argument position. The ergative case generalization is not a natural consequence of a structural case analysis of ergative marking.

In Nepali, ergative case is never possible on unaccusative intransitive verbs. This provides a nice substantiation of the ergative case generalization:

- (37) g<sup>h</sup>am-ma    makkʌn    pʌgl-iyo  
 sun-LOC    butter    melt-PERF.3.SG  
 'The butter melted in the sun.'  
 (Lindemann 2019: 251)

Another example of a derived subject is a passive construction, in which the object moves to subject position. For the subject of a passive construction in Nepali, ergative case is not possible, as predicted by the ergative case generalization, and accusative marking may or may not be present:

- (38) mriga-(laj)    mar-i-jo  
 deer-(ACC)    kill-PASS-PERF.3.SG  
 'The deer was killed.'  
 (Lindemann 2019: 252)

For an inherent case analysis, ergative case is assigned by the head where the NP gets its thematic role. For a dependent case analysis, the relevant factor is whether there are multiple NPs in the same domain (Baker & Bobaljik 2017, p. 5).

In both theories, a critical test of the ergative case generalization comes from constructions with multiple internal arguments, such as the passive of a double object construction or the applicative of an unaccusative verb (Legate 2012, p. 182).

The common difficulty with passive double object constructions, as noted by Legate, is that for many languages, including Nepali, the indirect object is

obligatorily marked dative. This may or may not satisfy a transitivity restriction. In the examples below, *-lai* is optional on the object of a bivalent verb but obligatory on the indirect object of a double object verb:

- (39) ram-le kitab-(*lai*) pʌd<sup>h</sup>-jo  
 ram-ERG book-(ACC) read-PERF.3.SG  
 ‘Ram read a book.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 252)

- (40) ram-le sita-*lai* kitab di-yo  
 ram-ERG sita-DAT book give-PERF.3.SG  
 ‘Ram gave Sita a book.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 252)

So (40) does not allow an ergative on “book” either because of the ergative case generalization or because it does not satisfy a transitivity restriction. Furthermore, Nepali does not appear to have the sort of applicatives that would be useful for testing the hypothesis.

There are some verbs in Nepali that could arguably be considered unaccusative transitives, i.e., verbs with two internal arguments. For these verbs, we do find ergative marking on the subject:

- (31) gʌiɖa-hʌru-le hat:i-*lai*  
 rhino-PL-ERG elephant-ACC  
 g<sup>h</sup>er-e  
 surround-PERF.3.PL

‘The rhinos surrounded the elephant.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 253)

- (32) d̪zʌŋʌl-le upʌtʃʌka-*lai*  
 forest-ERG valley-ACC  
 g<sup>h</sup>er-jo  
 surround-PERF.3.SG

‘The forest covered the valley.’

(Lindemann 2019, p. 253)

It may be the case that the subject of (31) is an agent rather than a theme, but this is less plausible for (32). If true, this would potentially be evidence to support a dependent case analysis, because ergative marking is indeed possible in the presence of another argument, regardless of semantic role.

#### 4. Conclusions

Ergative patterning in Indo-Aryan languages does not as a rule exhibit the deep syntactic ergativity found in Dyirbal. However, even compared to related languages, ergative case-marking in Nepali has a minimal impact on the syntax. Hindi and Marathi exhibit ergative patterning in verbal agreement, adjectival cross-reference, and a sensitivity to case marking in subordinate and relative clauses. None of this is found in Nepali.

A complete syntactic analysis of Nepali would likely need to consider ergativity as a dependent case, such that ergativity is assigned in the presence of an object. It would also need to characterize the presence of pragmatic or “optional” ergativity in the imperfective.

Adherence to the Marantz Case Generalization indicates that it is not structural, nor does it neatly fit into Legate’s inherent case analysis. The dependent case analysis is fairly straightforward if we follow the conclusion from 4.1.2 that ergative case is restricted to transitive clauses. The analysis is a little trickier if we accept that ergative marking is possible with unergative intransitives, because it would have to explain why ergativity is variable in both perfective and imperfective clauses with unergative intransitives. The main visible trace of ergativity in the syntax is a strong adherence to the Marantz Ergative Case Generalization, which could be framed in terms of the semantic roles of the case-marked subject. Ergativity in Nepali is largely morphological and has relatively little impact on the underlying syntactic organization.

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