

Case Assignment in Nepali

Introduction

Nepali (Indo-Aryan) exhibits split-ergative case marking. Previous studies have described the distribution of the ergative marker *-le*, but none have offered a formal account of how it is assigned. The purpose of this paper is to work closer to a formal account, and present the challenges that arise. In order to do so I first synthesize previous descriptions of the ergative marker and propose that Nepali has an aspect-based split combined with optional ergativity. I then present new evidence from tense-less clauses and argue that in Nepali, neither ergative nor absolutive case may be assigned like nominative in Spec,TP. Finally, I present a puzzle: how to account for case assignment given the issues that arise with both configurational and structural analyses.

Describing the distribution of *-le*

Nepali shows consistent ergative marking on subjects of transitive verbs in the perfective aspect. Subjects of unaccusative verbs never show ergative marking. Subjects of other types of verbs are sometimes marked as ergative. This is exemplified in (1-3) by the required, optional, and impossible ergative marking on perfective transitive, imperfective, and unaccusative sentences respectively and summarized in Table 1.

- (1) Ram-le patrika kin-eko-chha (2) Ram-(le) patrika kin-chha
 Ram-ERG newspaper buy-PFV-Pres.3sg Ram-ERG newspaper buy-Pres.3sg
 ‘Ram has bought a newspaper.’ ‘Ram buys a newspaper.’

- (3) Ram aa-yo
 Ram(ABS) come-PAST.3SG
 ‘Ram came.’

Table 1	transitive	unergative	unaccusative
perfective	ERG	(ERG)	*ERG
imperfective	(ERG)	(ERG)	*ERG

Previous accounts have found that the presence of ergative marking in Nepali depends on aspect, animacy (Li 2007), nature of the predicate (Butt and Paudel 2007), and information structure (Hutt and Subedie 1999). I propose that since the grey-shaded subjects may be optionally/variably unmarked, they do not require ERG for licensing. On these subjects, *-le* appears via a semantically-condition process separate from licensing. Only perfective, transitive subjects, which cannot surface without *-le*, are licensed by ERG. The next sections address this.

Height of case licensing

A central question in case theories of ergative-absolutive languages has been to ask which case, ergative or absolutive, is assigned like nominative in Spec, TP. A range of literature has converged on the idea that ergative case is assigned low (Coon, Massam, Travis, to appear, and works cited there). I argue that Nepali supports this claim, because ergative subjects are licensed in TP-less clauses, such as the reduced relative clause in (4). In this clause, the verb *pakaaeko*, is marked only for aspect, not for tense (tense marking would make it ungrammatical) and yet ergative case is still available.

- (4) mai-le [me-ro aamaa-le pakaa-eko] khaana khaa-e
 I-ERG I-GEN mother-ERG cook-PFV food eat-1.past
 ‘I ate the food that my mother cooked.’

It is alternately proposed that in some languages absolutive subject case is assigned like nominative in Spec, TP. Legate (2008) argues that Hindi is such a language because absolutive case is not available in TP-less

clauses like (5) and the subject must be licensed by genitive instead (see Mahajan, in press, for a counter-argument). In Nepali, however, intransitive subjects may appear with the unmarked absolutive case in a similarly nonfinite clause (6). Sentences (4) and (6) therefore suggest that in Nepali, both ergative and absolutive cases are assigned lower than TP.

- (5) [raam-ke bhaiThne]-par maa-ne usko khaanaa diyaa
 Ram-GEN sit.NONFIN]-LOC mother-ERG him.DAT food.ABS give.PERF
 ‘When Ram sat down, Mother gave him food.’ [Hindi: Mohanan 1994: 78]
- (6) [ram-∅ bas-epachhi] usko bhai-le us-laai khaana di-yo
 Ran-ABS sit.NONFIN-after 3sg.GEN brother-ERG 3sg.DAT food give-3gs.Past
 ‘When Ram sat down, his brother gave him food.’ [Nepali]

Towards a solution

We thus establish that an explanation for Nepali’s case marking and licensing will need to account for ergative case assigned to only perfective, transitive subjects, and that all case is assigned lower than TP. We now attempt to explain this through both a configurational and structural approach, and note the issues that arise.

Configurational approach: In a configurational approach (Marantz 1991, Baker and Bobaljik, in press, a.o.), ergative case is assigned to the higher of two DPs competing for case in the same local domain. ABS is the unmarked case, assigned to the lower DP or to the only DP in an intransitive clause. It is appealing for this data because the distribution of absolutive is not restricted. However, it runs into the same problem it does in all aspect-based splits; in imperfective transitive clauses there are two DPs but both may be (un)marked with ABS. A bi-clausal analysis of the imperfective proposed by Laka (2006) and Coon (2010, 2013) would solve this, but it relies on the imperfective being marked by an auxiliary verb that is absent in the perfective. In Nepali, however, as in other Indo-Aryan languages (Bjorkman 2015, a.o.) there is not evidence that the imperfective has a more complicated structure than the perfective (as seen by the presence of the auxiliary *chha* both with (1) and without (2) (obligatory) ergative).

Structural or inherent approach: In a structural approach, case is assigned by a functional head. In Nepali, this would need to be a head lower than T⁰. An inherent case explanation (see Woolford 1997 a.o) could be proposed in which a transitive, perfective v^o assigns ergative case along with an agentive theta-role to the DP in its specifier position while all other v^o s assign absolutive case. Ergative case marking could alternatively be attributed to a perfective ASP⁰ that assigns ergative case to the DP external argument that raises to its specifier position (as Bjorkman (2015) proposes for Hindi-Urdu). This analysis predicts that all external arguments (including unergative subjects) are assigned ergative case in the perfective. This is the right prediction for Hindi-Urdu, requires modification for Nepali, since only perfective transitive subjects are licensed by ergative case. The present paper pursues a structural approach, and offers a modification of this proposal.

Selected references

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