

Split Ergativity in Nepali and Its Typological Significance

This paper examines the case-marking pattern in Nepali and makes the following arguments.

First, contrary to previous analyses, which regard Nepali either as a (fully) ergative language (e.g. Abadie 1974; Verma 1992) or as a split-ergative language conditioned by tense/aspect (e.g. Klaiman 1987; Masica 1991), Nepali shows a far more complex case-marking pattern than previously described (see Table 1). Specifically speaking, the language shows a split between the perfective domain and imperfective domain with respect to the case marking on transitive subjects, and a split between unaccusative verbs and unergative verbs with respect to the case marking on intransitive subjects. Furthermore, the case marking on direct objects in the absence of an indirect object in Nepali is sensitive to animacy and specificity.

Second, Nepali shows split ergativity conditioned by the semantic nature of NPs and its split pattern is of great typological significance. In the domain of inanimate nouns, Nepali is ergative; elsewhere, the language resists classification as ergative or accusative. Given that the majority of attested splits in ergativity follow the (1st & 2nd) > 3rd pattern and the other widespread pattern is pronouns > full NPs, with other patterns being attested “only rarely” (DeLancey 1981), the finding that Nepali shows a split between inanimate NPs and animate NPs is typologically significant in that it provides a good example of a rare split pattern.

Third, the split ergativity conditioned by the semantic nature of NPs in Nepali conforms to and supports Dixon’s (1979, 1994) “Nominal Hierarchy.”

In sum, the paper shows that Nepali case marking is far more complex than previously described. What can be made out of this complexity is that Nepali shows split ergativity conditioned by the nature of NPs, and the split pattern shown in the language is of typological significance and has a natural basis in the Nominal Hierarchy.

Table 1: Case Marking on A (transitive subjects), S (intransitive subjects) and O (objects) in Nepali

	A--- <i>-le</i>		S--- <i>-le</i>			O--- <i>-lai</i>			
	Animate	<i>Inanimate</i>	Unaccusative		Unergative	Animate			<i>Inanimate</i>
			Animate	<i>Inanimate</i>		proper name or pronoun	specific, but neither proper name nor pronoun	non-specific	
Simple present tense	(le)	<i>le</i>	ϕ	ϕ	ϕ: 30% (le): 65% le: 5%	lai	(lai)	ϕ	ϕ
Present progressive tense	(le)	<i>le</i>	ϕ	ϕ	ϕ: 24.4% (le): 61% le: 12.1%	lai	(lai)	ϕ	ϕ
Past progressive tense	(le)	<i>le</i>	ϕ	ϕ	ϕ: 17.1% (le):61.3% le: 9.8%	lai	(lai)	ϕ	ϕ
Past habitual tense	(le)	<i>le</i>	ϕ	ϕ	ϕ: 14.6% (le):51.2% le: 14.6%	lai	(lai)	ϕ	ϕ
Simple future tense	(le)	<i>le</i>	ϕ	ϕ	ϕ: 15.8% (le):34.2% le: 36.8%	lai	(lai)	ϕ	ϕ
Simple past tense	le	<i>le</i>	ϕ	ϕ	ϕ: 12.5% (le): 30% le: 37.5%	lai	(lai)	ϕ	ϕ
Present perfect tense	le	<i>le</i>	ϕ	ϕ	ϕ: 4.9% (le):19.5% le: 51.2%	lai	(lai)	ϕ	ϕ
Past perfect tense	le	<i>le</i>	ϕ	ϕ	ϕ: 4.9% (le):24.4% le: 41.5%	lai	(lai)	ϕ	ϕ