Optional ergative case marking

What can be expressed by its absence?

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Issue

- Case may be assigned based on the **structural/grammatical relations** between an argument and the case governor:
  - ⇒ All transitive subjects have ergative case
- Case may also be **lexically specified** by the case governor:
  - ⇒ Subjects of experiencer verbs have dative case
- Case can be **(inherently) semantically constrained**:
  - ⇒ Spatial cases are semantic, not syntactically governed
- Case can be determined by **government** and **conditions**:
  - ⇒ Case is (probabilistically) determinable based on characteristics of the governor and its governee
Ergative case marking in Nepali

(1) məi-le/*mə pauroṭi kaṭ-ē  
1SG-ERG/*1SG bread cut-PST.1SG  
‘I cut the bread.’  

(2) məi-le/mə pauroṭi kaṭ-dɔi-tsʰu  
1SG-ERG/1SG bread cut-IPFV-PRES.1SG  
‘I am cutting the bread.’  

(3) dʰuŋga-huru-le/*dʰuŋga-huru dzʰjal pʰuṭa-e  
stone-PL-ERG/*stone-PL window break-PST.3PL  
‘The stones broke the window.’  

(4) dʰuŋga-huru-le/*dʰuŋga-huru dzʰjal pʰuṭa-dɔi-tsʰon  
stone-PL-ERG/*stone-PL window break-IPFV-PRES.3PL  
‘The stones broke the window.’ (Li 2007: 1465-1467)
Optional Ergative Case Marking

- Optional Ergative Case Marking (OEM) is a type of Differential Subject Marking (DSM) where case marking of subjects is **conditional** rather than **invariably governed**.

- Like other types of Differential Argument Marking (DAM), such as Differential Object Marking (DOM) (Bossong 1985, Aissen 2003) differences in the formal manifestation of an argument NP may have meaningful consequences for the interpretation of a clause.

- In OEM, grammatical information (i.e. ergative case) thought to identify core arguments is ‘**optionally**’ **absent** without any apparent consequences for the grammatical function of subject NP.
OEM in a typological perspective

- OEM is attested in many languages of the Himalayas, Australia and Papua New Guinea.
- It is particularly well described for Tibeto-Burman languages, with various papers in a dedicated volume (Chelliah and Hyslop 2011).
- It has been linked to a range of different semantic and information-structural factors (McGregor 2010), including focus alternations in Tibetan (e.g. Tounadre 1995), and the interaction of aspect and animacy constraints in Nepali (e.g. Li 2007).
Features and conditions (Corbett 2006, 2012)

- Features and conditions are relevant for **case government**.
- The case feature value **ERG** is a **morphosyntactic feature**.
- **Morphosyntactic features** are of direct relevance for syntactic rules like government rules that **determine the presence of case** on a noun (phrase) with a given grammatical function (i.e. transitive subject A).
- When the realisation of a feature value (e.g. ERG) varies in a (typically) **gradient** way (as in OEM), we need to elucidate the **conditions** (e.g. animacy) determining the likelihood of exponence.
What determines splits?

- Which **features** underlie splits in the grammatical domains that permit OEM?
- Which **conditions** determine whether ergative case marking is present or absent within these domains?
- What are the **hierarchical relations** between, features and semantic, pragmatic and information-structural conditions?

To be able to answer these questions, we need to ask what factors lead to the marking of ergative case, and what can be expressed by its absence.
This research reports on the results of a micro-typology of Tamangic and Tibetan languages spoken within the Tibetan Plateau Buffer Zone between the more typologically consistent Indospheric and Sinospheric Tibeto-Burman languages of the region (Matisoff 1991, Bickel and Nichols 2003, Hildebrandt 2007).

Tamangic: Manange, Manang Gurung, Nar
Tibetan: Gyalsumdo
Our approach uses data gathered using parallel elicitation and discourse collection methods.

This permits the exploration of linguistic variability through exploring the consistencies and subtle differences among the languages under investigation.
Variables associated with OEM

**Verbal/clausal properties**
- predicate valence
- clause polarity
- aspect/tense

**Agent properties**
- person
- number
- animacy
- humanness
- definiteness
- specificity
- referentiality
- agent volition
- agent control

**Information structure**
- contrastive focus
- switch in agent

**Subjectivity**
- subjective judgment of speaker
- socially unexpected actions
- speech predicates

**NP properties**
- ‘heavy’ NPs

Based on variables discussed in Chelliah and Hyslop (2011)
## Data overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Manange</th>
<th>Gurung</th>
<th>Nar</th>
<th>Gyalsumdo</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Verb forms</strong></td>
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<td>100%</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Verbs with overt A/S NPs</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>With ERG S</strong></td>
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<td>2.3%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Intransitive</strong></td>
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<td><strong>With ERG S</strong></td>
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<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>With ERG A</strong></td>
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<td>2.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ditransitive</strong></td>
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<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>With ERG A</strong></td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unclear</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ergative transitive subjects in Manange

(5) cu-cu oh, \( k\eta=ri \) \( tu=p\eta \) ya=tse=tse \( khi \ m\eta\eta\eta\a-mi \) after-after oh mountain=LOC sit-NMLZR yak=PL=ERG 3SG curse-EVID
‘After, the yaks who stayed on the hill, cursed them (lit. him).’

(6) “t\( \lambda \) lo-to”, pi-tse l\( \lambda \)-tse, \( khim=ko=tse \) ten \( \lambda\le \) become do-IMP say-CVB do-CVB 3PL=DEF=ERG then like.this s\( \lambda\)rap piin-mi
curse give-EVID
‘Saying “Become like this!”, they made the curse.’

(7) \( sro=tse \) “kh\( \lambda \) ki a-kh\( \lambda \)” pi-tse, cu: u, a-kh\( \lambda\)-p\( \lambda \) ten friend=ERG come or NEG-come say-CVB after DIST NEG-come-NMLZR then
‘The friends were saying “Are (they) coming or not?” after that, (they) didn’t come (back).’
Ergative transitive subjects in Manange

- ERG is marked by an **enclitic**, that follows the definiteness clitic and the plural number clitic;
- ERG marking always denotes a **switch between equally agentive protagonists**;
- All objects/complements are **overtly realised** in clauses with ERG subjects;
- ERG NP is subject of an **affirmative, evidential marked main clause** or converbial transitive clause with a different subject to its matrix.
Unmarked transitive subjects in Manange

- Unmarked NPs are used for **maintenance of reference**, rather than a change in reference;
- All subjects are **definite and specific** (pronoun/definite marked/restrictive attributive modification);
- All objects/complements are **realised** in the clause;
- Unmarked NPs are the subject of **null marked main clause**, or a converbial transitive clauses with a different subject to its matrix, where the A referent is the same as the A/S referent in the preceding independent clause.
Ergative transitive subjects in Nar

(8) hjule-re jê ni-ce, hjule-je mhi-cuke=ce
village-LOC return go-PFCT.CV village-GEN person-PL=ERG
te kê-tʃin
remove come.home-PST

‘Having returned to the village, the villagers sent me packing (again).'</n

(9) njê: the-cuke tho-ne a-tʃhur-ce
1SG.INCL GEN sibling-PL meet-INF NEG able-PFCT.CV

njê: cawe lama=ce ŋâŋkê-tʃin
1SG.INCL GEN root lama=ERG give.HON-PST

‘Having not been able to meet my brothers, my root lama gave (help) to me.’
Ergative transitive subjects in Nar

- ERG is marked by an **enclitic**, that follows the plural number marker;
- Ergative case **marks non-discourse topic As** of transitives and ditransitives;
- All objects are **unrealised** in clauses with ERG subjects;
- All clauses are **affirmative, past tense main clauses**;
- In two cases, the transitive verb is the V1 in a **serial verb construction** with an intransitive V2: P of V1 = S of V2.
Unmarked transitive subjects in Nar

- All subjects are pronouns or kinship terms used as topics;
- All objects/complements are realised in the clause;
- Verb form is usually non-finite, namely a **converb or nominalised verb**.
Transitive subjects in Gurung

- ERG is marked by an **enclitic on pronouns** in the dataset;
- Two of the verbs are ‘se’ know, which **lexically governs ERG case** on its subject;
- Only two unmarked transitive NP subjects are found, both **subjects of nominalised verbs**.

(10) tsərkja ŋə=e se-bə=e tā teno khetipati lə-mu thing 1.SG=ERG know-NMLZR=ERG what all agriculture do-NPST

‘The other thing I know is that everyone grows crops.’

(11) ŋə=e/*ŋə the=ni se-mu 1SG=ERG/*1SG 3SG=DAT know-NPST

‘I know her.’ (elicited)
Conclusion

- Rather than being predictable on the basis of a single condition or, indeed, being rigidly fixed, our study of OEM in Manang reveals that a multitude of conditions on case marking are employed to indicate meaningful contrasts.

- Despite the low incidence of subject NPs in general (i.e. low referential density), and ERG marked NPs specifically, the presence of the ERG feature is not strictly determined by the grammatical function of an NP, but also its information-structural properties.
Conclusion

- The relevant conditions for case marking are revealed thought the (largely) complementary distribution of properties across the clauses.

- Determining the distribution of ergative case marking can only be understood by understanding what can be expressed by its absence.

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References


  
  http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~autotyp/download/enclaves@ALT5-2003BB-JN.pdf


