Conditions on Differential Ergative Case Marking

Oliver Bond, Kristine A. Hildebrandt & Dubi Nanda Dhakal

University of Surrey, SIUE & Tribhuvan University

1. Overview
In many dependent-marking languages of the Tibeto-Burman area, Differential Subject Marking (DSM) (de Hoop & de Swart 2008, Malchukov 2008) is manifested through case marking of core arguments that is conditional [in the sense of Corbett 2012] rather than invariably governed.

Variables associated with DEM (based on Chelliah and Hyslop 2011)
Agent/NP properties: Person, number, animacy, humanness, definiteness, specificity, referentiality, agent voition, agent control, ‘heavy’ NPs
Discourse structure: Conative focus, switch in agent, speech predicates
Verbal/Clausal properties: Predicative valence, clause polarity, aspect/tense/mood

2. Conditions on case-marking
We examined the distribution of Differential Ergative Case Marking (DEM) strategies in three Tamangic languages (Gurung, Manang, and Nar) to determine (statistically supported) conditional patterns underlying the distribution of covert, ergative and unmarked (absolutive) subjects.

(1) Animacy conditions in elicited Manang Gurung intransitives
a. tel aŋ dʒu pjuːmə-ŋa ‘you should behave well’
Yesterday that boy-ERG/that boy jump-PST
‘Yesterday the boy jumped (once).’

b. tel ə ‘I drank the water.’

(2) TAM conditions in elicited Manang Gurung transitives
a. nə-l nga 1SG-ERG/1SG that water drink-PST
‘I drank the water.’

b. nə-l nga 1SG-ERG/1SG that water drink-NPST
‘I will drink the water.’

(3) Overridden animacy/tense constraints in Manang Gurung discourse
a. So-ci sipal dapha se-jae ‘I will make a request’

b. ñə-l kajon tsa ko-pi pi good do-PURP should give-SUB have bedbug-ERG say ‘The bedbug said ‘You should behave well’.’

In Manang Gurung, animacy is not a major factor for DEM since protagonists in transitive can be inanimate and receive ergative marking.
Past tense forms may be unmarked for ergative case, unlike in elicitation.

Table 1. Summary descriptive statistics of the distribution of ERG and DAT marked subjects in discourse for four languages of Manang district, Nepal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Manage</th>
<th>Gurung</th>
<th>Nar</th>
<th>Gyalsumdo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb forms</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With overt A/S NPs</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With ERG A/S</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intransitive</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With overt S</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With ERG S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complement-taking</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With overt A</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With ERG A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With overt P</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With DAT P</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Can DEM variables be used as predictors of ergative case?
The low incidence of argument NPs in Tamangic discourse (see Table 1) in general means that a very large body of data is likely to be needed to investigate multiple variables. However, initial statistical investigation suggests that some tentative conclusions are possible.

Table of the nine instances of pi ‘say’ only two have overt subjects, one of which is ergative marked, while the other is absolutive demonstrating that this is not an instance of lexically governed case.
Gurung: Of the complement-taking verbs with ergative case marking in our sample (n = 27), 63% are with verbs of speech/psych verbs.

4. Other factors underlying DEM distribution in Tamangic discourse
While DEM potential is influenced by differences in the referential density and case-inventory of each language, the overall distribution of ergative case is determined primarily by the information-structure of the clause. Most noticeably, ergative marking in Manang and Gurung is typically found with verbs of speech, and although this is a facet of discourse structure as speech verbs do not consistently behave in this way.

In Manang and Nar, the presence of S/A argument significantly correlates with a switch in reference, and in Nar ergative case also correlates with the presence of two overt arguments. In Gurung we observe a more complex situation and it is likely that additional discourse pragmatic factors will reveal the conditions that determine DEM.

5. Summary
For some languages, discourse-structural features (such as information structure) are a more important factor for case marking than structural relations.

This is highlighted by the fact that the conditions underlying DEM that are revealed through elicitation only provide the contexts in which variability is most likely – not the actual distribution of case in discourse.

In Manang and Nar, the presence of S/A argument significantly correlates with a switch in reference, and in Nar ergative case also correlates with the presence of two overt arguments. In Gurung we observe a more complex situation and it is likely that additional discourse pragmatic factors will reveal the conditions that determine DEM.

Contact: o.bond@surrey.ac.uk
khildeb@siue.edu
dubidhakal@yahoo.com