

ERGATIVE CASE AND VERBAL AGREEMENT: EXPLAINING DIALECTAL VARIATIONS IN NEPALI

P.Chandra, U.Udaar

Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, New Delhi, India

Summary: This paper demonstrates that Darjeeling Nepali, a «dialect» or variety of Nepali exhibits ergative patterns and verbal agreement paradigms that differ from those in the mainland variant. It has overt case-marked ergative subjects that optionally trigger verbal agreement, unlike mainland Nepali. We provide a syntactic analysis for these dialectal variations.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of ergativity in mainland Nepali, a north Indo-Aryan language spoken in Nepal, has been widely discussed by a number of researchers [Bickel 2004, Poudel 2008, Yadava 1997]. This language marks ergative subjects with an overt *le* case morpheme, like many other languages exhibiting ergativity (e.g. Hindi-Urdu). However, in contrast to these typologically related languages, Nepali ergative subjects trigger verbal agreement in person, number and gender. Some contrasting examples are given below:

- (1) *māile yās pāsāl-ma pātrika kin-ē*
 1.sg.erg dem.obl store.loc newspaper.nom buy.1.sg.perf
 ‘I bought the newspaper in this store.’ [Bickel, Yadava 2000: 348]
- (2) *john-ne ek billi dekhi*
 John.m.sg.erg one cat.f.sg.nom see.f.sg.perf
 ‘John saw a cat.’

As can be seen in the Nepali sentence (1), the subject DP is marked with an overt ergative case morpheme, which also triggers verbal agreement. On the other hand, we find that while Hindi-Urdu also shows an ergative case marked subject (2), it fails to trigger verbal agreement. The agreement is, instead, found with an unmarked object.

This unique feature of Nepali has received multiple explanations. One notable account for it is provided by Bickel and Yadava [2000: 343-373] who suggest that the language follows the Thematic Hierarchy (see Table 1) when it comes to verbal agreement.

Table 1. Thematic Hierarchy

A				O	
Agent	Effector	Goal	Locative	Theme	Patient
	Perciever	Experiencer	Stimulus		
	Possessor	Receiver	Possessed		

According to Bickel and Yadava, the accessibility of a DP for verbal agreement in a given language may be dependent upon the Thematic Hierarchy. The theta roles placed higher in this hierarchy are more accessible for agreement with the verb than those placed lower in the hierarchy. Ergative subjects are agents and are therefore placed at the thematically highest position. That being the case, it is obvious that Nepali ergative subjects trigger verbal agreement.

On the other hand, languages like Hindi-Urdu suppress the Thematic Hierarchy and obey another constraint, namely Case Marking, for verbal agreement. Case Marking Condition states that verbal agreement is triggered by the highest unmarked nominal. This is illustrated in the example of Hindi-Urdu in (2), where verbal agreement is not triggered by the ergative case marked subject but by an unmarked object nominal. Also consider (3), where the agent marked with an overt ergative case morpheme again fails to trigger verbal agreement, which is instead controlled by the unmarked object. A similar pattern follows for dative case marked experiencer subjects in Hindi-Urdu, where the experiencer subject fails to trigger agreement with the verb, as in (4). In this example also, we find that the verbal agreement is triggered by an unmarked nominal.

- (3) *jɔn-ne roʈi kʰayi*
 John.m.sg.erg bread.f.sg.nom eat.f.sg.perf
 ‘John ate the bread.’
- (4) *jɔn-ko bʰukʰ ləgi he*
 John.m.sg.dat hunger.f.sg.nom lv.f.sg. be.f.sg.pres
 ‘John is feeling hungry.’

That said, these two conditions do not suffice to capture cross-linguistic variations in the verbal agreement paradigms of Indo-Aryan languages. There are quite a few other languages which follow neither the Thematic Hierarchy nor the Case Marking Constraint for verbal agreement in their ergative constructions. We present examples from Marwari and Kutchi Gujarati below, which do not mark their ergative subjects with an overt case morpheme and yet end up showing only object-verb agreement, see (5)-(6) for illustration.

- (5) *jon məʈki ucəyɪ*
 john.m.sg pot.f.sg. pick.f.sg.perf
 ‘John picked up the pot.’ **Marwari**
- (6) *jon meri nɛ dhudr-av-i*
 John.m.sg. Mary.f.sg.acc shake-caus-f.sg.perf
 ‘John shook Mary.’ **Kutchi Gujarati** [Patel 2007: 51]

In such a scenario, it is further interesting to note that a «dialect» of Nepali, namely Darjeeling Nepali, spoken in the Darjeeling region in West Bengal, India, exhibits ergative verbal agreement patterns which deviate from the patterns found in mainland Nepali. In this paper, we aim to present those cases, first with transitive predicates and then with unergative predicates. We first demonstrate that ergative subjects in Darjeeling Nepali are marked overtly with a case morpheme and yet optionally control verbal agreement. This suggests that either both Thematic Hierarchy and Case Marking Constraints are taken in account in

this variety, or there is a third, independent factor that controls verbal agreement. We then go on to present the agreement paradigm in the language, with «bodily» unergative predicates. These predicates, while accompanied by a certain transitive light verb, mark their subjects as ergative and suppress verbal agreement. We suggest that these agreement variations emerge from the way the subject DP is marked in the language: when it is case-marked by a c-commanding T, subject-verb agreement ensues. In all other contexts, the subject gets an inherent ergative case from *v*, and consequently fails to trigger phi-agreement.

2. Ergativity in Darjeeling Nepali

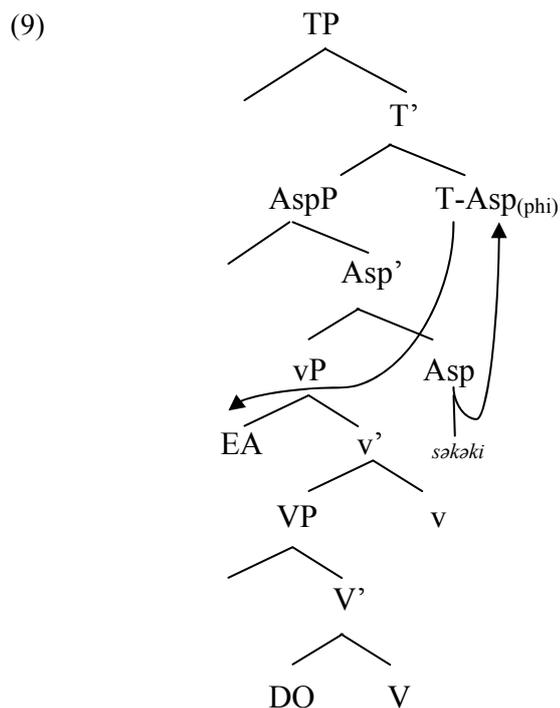
In this section, we present novel data from the Darjeeling variety of Nepali, which are different from those of mainland Nepali. Darjeeling Nepali has ergativity represented by an overt ergative morpheme on the subject DP, just like the standard variant. However, it differs from the latter by optionally allowing verbal agreement with the marked subject. This variation is construction-specific, i.e. while in (7) which has an independent perfective morpheme, verbal agreement is obligatorily controlled by the ergative subject, in (8) without independent aspect-tense morphemes, the verb must carry default agreement.

- (7) *meri-le luga dhui sākāki che*
 Mary.erg cloth.mpl wash perf.f.sg. be.f.sg.
 ‘Mary has washed the clothes.’
- (8) *ma-le luga d^hoyo*
 Mother.erg cloth.m.pl wash.def.perf
 ‘Mother has washed the clothes.’

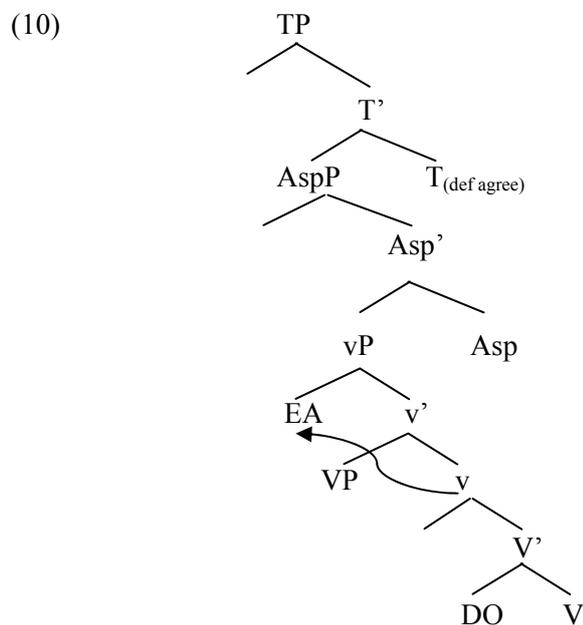
The data from the Darjeeling variety, thus, presents an aberration from the view that thematic hierarchy or case marking constraints are the decisive factors for verbal agreement in ergative constructions in Indo-Aryan languages. We believe that this demands a deeper inquiry into the structural or syntactic properties of such constructions.

At the syntactic level, we posit that Darjeeling Nepali shows phi-feature agreement with the T head that comes with unvalued phi-features [Chomsky 2000, 2001]. See (9), where the external argument EA agrees in phi-features with both aspect and tense heads. It receives a structural ergative case value¹ from T, very similar to Basque ergative DPs, as shown in Rezac et al. [2014]. Note that T and the concerned DP can enter into a phi-feature relation only when the intervening Asp head moves and adjoins to the T head. The Asp-T head will then agree long distance with the DP. The DP later moves to the specifier of TP for EPP reasons.

¹ According to Chomsky [2000, 2001], structural case results from phi-feature (Agree) relation between a T/v probe with unvalued phi-features and a DP carrying valued phi-features that it c-commands.



In contrast, when the aspect head remains in situ, it prevents T from agreeing with the DP. In such instances, the DP remains in situ and receives an inherent ergative case from the v (or Asp-v) head. Since this is not an Agree-based structural case, the verb fails to show phi-feature valuation with the nominal, see a schema in (10):



3. Unergatives

This section discusses the paradigm of ergativity in the unergative domain of Darjeeling Nepali. We show that intransitives in Darjeeling Nepali do not generally show ergativity in the perfective aspect. We demonstrate this point in (11)-(12), where the ergative case marker fails to show up with the unaccusative and unergative verbs respectively, even in the perfective aspect.

- (11) *nāni ləɽyo*
 child.nom fall.def.perf
 ‘The child fell.’
- (12) *nāni j^hukyo*
 child.nom bend.perf
 ‘The child bent down.’

However, further investigation into the unergative domain of Darjeeling Nepali reveals that there is a class of specific «bodily» unergative verbs that show ergativity in the perfective aspect, see (13)-(14).

- (13) *nāni-le k^hokyo*
 child.erg cough.perf
 ‘The child coughed.’
- (14) *nāni-le c^hikyo*
 child.erg sneeze.perf
 ‘The child sneezed.’

It is to be noted that in all instances with ergative subject constructions with «bodily» unergative predicates, the verb obligatorily shows default agreement. This is a further challenge to Bickel and Yadava’s contention that Nepali in general follows the Thematic Hierarchy for verbal agreement.

Adding on to this observation, we illustrate that there are some light verbs which play a role in the appearance or non-appearance of the ergative case marker in the perfective aspect. As is evident from (15)-(16), the ergative marker is disallowed in the presence of unaccusative light verbs like ‘to come’ (15) or ‘to go’ (16).

- (15) *balək-lai hāc^hu ayo*
 child.dat sneeze come.perf
 ‘The child sneezed.’
- (16) *beluki b^hai gəyo*
 evening.nom happen go.perf
 ‘Evening fell.’

Comparing examples (13)-(14) with (15)-(16), we observe that use of certain unaccusative light verbs blocks the presence of the ergative case marker on the subject. On the other hand, we also see that the presence of a transitive light verb ‘to do’ triggers obligatory ergative case marker, as in (17).

- (17) *balək-*(le) hāc^hu gəryo*
 child.*(erg) sneeze do.perf
 ‘The child sneezed.’

Concluding from the data discussed above, the intransitive light verbs do not facilitate the ergative case marker on the subject DP in the perfective aspect. On the other hand, a transitive light verb requires the presence of ergative case marker on the subject DP for a construction to be grammatical. Given the significant role played by light verbs in triggering ergativity, we suggest that the transitivity of the light verb is responsible for ergative case marking in Darjeeling Nepali. This entails that even in cases like (13)-(14), without overt light verbs, their structural representations will include a phonologically covert light verb, with interesting implications for case and agreement relations.

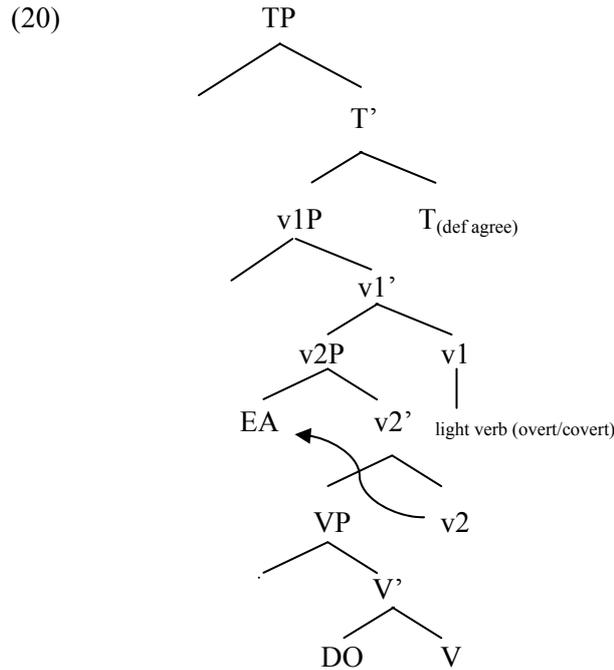
Taking a slight detour before proposing the analysis for unergative constructions with ergative subjects, we inquire whether Darjeeling Nepali unergatives are underlying transitives. Indeed, that unergatives may be underlying transitive verbs is not a new idea. According to the Implicit Object Conjecture, unergatives are considered to be underlying transitives, with implicit or phonologically null objects [Hale, Keyser 1993: 53-109]. We now test if the unergative constructions are underlying transitives in Darjeeling Nepali, to establish the correlation between transitivity of the verb and ergative case marker on the subject.

In this regard, we use specific diagnostics to check whether there is an underlying covert object in the unergative constructions in Darjeeling Nepali. In the first test, we show that there is a place in the unergative construction for an overt direct object, see (18). Secondly, we find that we can modify the implicit object using an adjective in (19).

- (18) *jon-le kukur-ko k^hoki k^hokyo*
 John.erg dog.gen cough cough.m.sg.perf
 ‘John coughed a dog’s cough.’
- (19) *jon-le dərɫagdo hãc^hyu gəryo*
 John.erg dangerous sneeze do.m.sg.perf
 ‘John sneezed dangerously.’

In summary, we have made the following observations about Darjeeling Nepali. First, it marks its ergative subjects with an overt ergative morpheme. The ergative DP triggers verbal agreement on the Asp-T head when Asp does not intervene in a T-DP agreement relation. It receives a structural ergative in such cases and triggers verbal agreement. However, when Asp head intervenes, T cannot agree with the DP, which instead gets an inherent ergative from Asp-v head. The verb carries default agreement.

In the domain of unergatives, ergative subjects are allowed only with «bodily» unergatives which are underlying transitives. Ergative subjects are obligatory in such instances when they co-occur with transitive light verbs. However, there is obligatory suppression of verbal agreement in all such constructions. We therefore suggest that in constructions with unergative predicates, the DP has an inherent ergative case from v, see schema (20).



The tree in (20) is motivated by Mahajan's [2012] structure for ergative subject constructions. This structure has a double-layered vP, with the higher v hosting the light verb and the lower v hosting the external argument in its specifier. Since the light verb cannot move and adjoin to either T or the lower v, it intervenes in an agreement relation between T and the DP. The DP is therefore forced to take an inherent ergative value from the theta-assigning lower v. This explains why the ergative DP in unergative predicate constructions obligatorily fails to control verbal agreement.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, we have shown that the ergative-absolutive paradigms are different for mainland Nepali and its Darjeeling variant with regards to the nature of ergative case licensed on their subject DP. We have shown that while mainland Nepali ergative is a structural case licensed as a result of phi-feature agreement between the subject DP and T head, the Darjeeling variant has both kinds: structural valued by T and inherent assigned by v.

The mechanism of inherent ergative case licensing is replicated with «bodily» unergatives which show an obligatory ergative case and default verbal agreement. We have shown that the light verb acts as an intervener at par with the Asp head in blocking the phi-agreement between T head and the subject DP. Hence, we claim that the ergative appearing on the subject DP in such constructions is an inherent case licensed by the theta assigning v head.

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