

# 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) **mpi-le/\*mɔ** pauroṭi kaṭ-ẽ  
1SG-ERG/\*1SG bread cut-PST.1SG  
'I cut the bread.'
- (2) **mpi-le/mɔ** pauroṭi kaṭ-dɔi-ts<sup>h</sup>u  
1SG-ERG/1SG bread cut-IPFV-PRES.1SG  
'I am cutting the bread.'
- (3) **d<sup>h</sup>unga-huru-le/\*d<sup>h</sup>unga-huru** dz<sup>h</sup>jal p<sup>h</sup>uṭa-e  
stone-PL-ERG/\*stone-PL window break-PST.3PL  
'The stones broke the window.'
- (4) **d<sup>h</sup>unga-huru-le/\*d<sup>h</sup>unga-huru** dz<sup>h</sup>jal p<sup>h</sup>uṭa-dɔi-ts<sup>h</sup>ɔn  
stone-PL-ERG/\*stone-PL window break-IPFV-PRES.3PL  
'The stones broke the window.' (Li 2007: 1465-1467)
- ERG is obligatory on **animate subjects** in the Perfective but not in the Imperfective.
  - It is obligatory on **inanimate subjects**.

# 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)

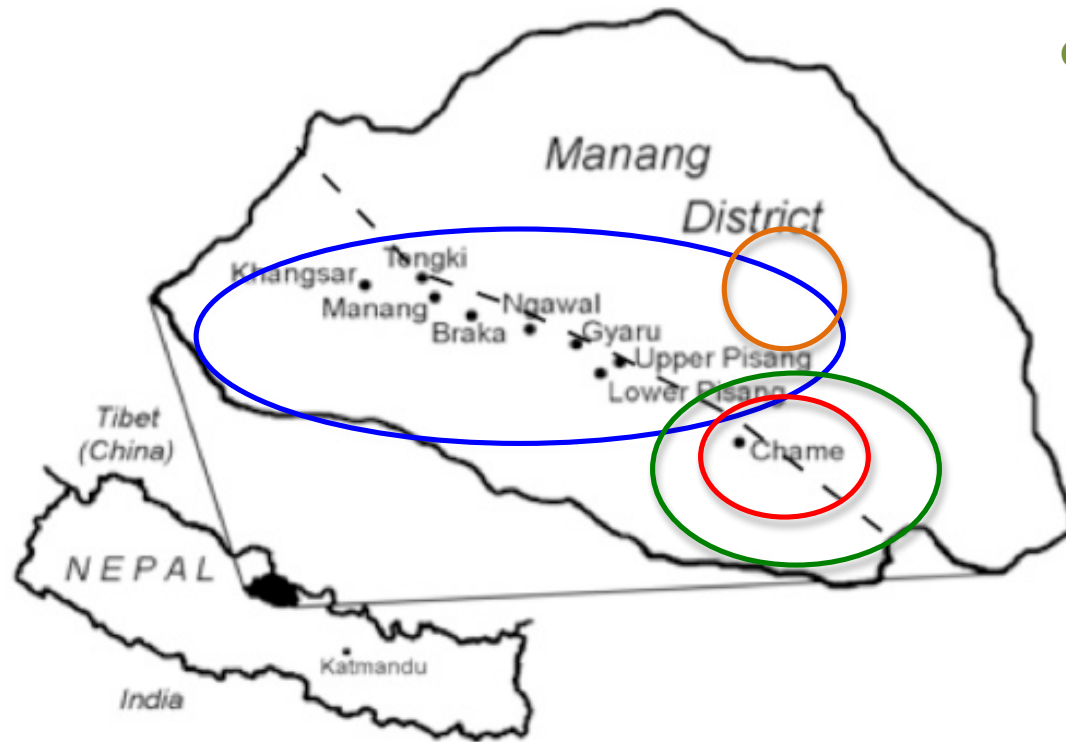
- Features and conditions are relevant for **case government**.
- The case feature value **ERG** is a **morphosyntactic feature**.
- **Morphosyntactic features** are of direct relevance for syntactic rules like government rules that **determine the presence of case** on a noun (phrase) with a given grammatical 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.

# OEM in Manang District, Nepal



- 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**



# DAM in Manang database

**Differential Argument Marking in the Languages of Manang**

Record 000072 Created by Oliver Bond 25/07/2013 Last modified by Admin 04/08/2013

Variety 2 Manange

Source 01 KathmanduM99M1 02

Descriptive name Yak Buff

Record complete (locked)  
Record incomplete (open)

Toolbox 021 Verb no. 3 Verb form 00017 pi-tse say-CC

Negation 01 Affirmative form

Tense 01 Unmarked

Aspect 01 Unmarked

Evidentiality 01 Unmarked

Nominalized 01 Unmarked

Converbial 02 Generic converbial marking

Mood 01 Unmarked

Argument structure 05 Transitive (A, FINITE CLAUSE)

Embedded clause 01 Not embedded

Modifying clause 01 Verb is not in a clause modifying a nominal head

Comments A = sro=tse 'friends=ERG'

Position of A/S NP relative to the verb 02 A/S NP is realised within the clause headed by the verb

Verb forms since last mention of A/S NP 02 Two intervening verbs

A/S referent identical to previous verb (referent will be coded as different if the NP subject is reiterated or cataphorically available) 02 A/S is different to that of the previous verb

A/S Head type 04 Common noun

A/S Referentiality 01 Referential

A/S Person marking 01 Unmarked

A/S Person 03 Third person

A/S Number marking 01 Unmarked

A/S Number 02 Plural

A/S Case marking 02 Ergative

A/S Humanness 02 Non-human

A/S Animacy 01 Animate

A/S Definiteness marking 01 Unmarked

P/T Referentiality 02 Non-referential

A/S Possessed 99 N/A

P/T Semantic person 99 N/A

A/S Demonstrative modification 01 Unmarked

P/T Semantic number 99 N/A

A/S Quantifier/numeral modification 01 Unmarked

P/T Humanness 99 N/A

A/S Attributive modification 01 Unmarked

P/T Animacy 99 N/A

A/S Clausal modification 01 Unmarked

- 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

	Manange		Gurung		Nar		Gyalsumdo	
<b>Verb forms</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>100%</b>	27	100%
Verbs with overt A/S NPs	37	28.7%	25	34.7%	32	37.2%	2	7.4%
With ERG S	3	2.3%	3	4.2%	3	3.5%	0	0%
<b>Intransitive</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>70.5%</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>56.9%</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>
With overt S	26	20.2%	17	23.6%	5	13.51%	0	0%
With ERG S	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
<b>Transitive</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>27.2%</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>37.5%</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>41.9%</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>85.2%</b>
With overt A	11	8.5%	7	0%	9	10.47%	2	7.4%
With ERG A	3	2.3%	3	4.2%	2	2.3%	0	0%
<b>Ditransitive</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2.8%</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.2%</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>14.8%</b>
With overt A	0	0%	0	0%	1	1.2%	0	0%
With ERG A	0	0%	0	0%	1	1.2%	0	0%
<b>Unclear</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>

# Ergative transitive subjects in Manange

- (5) cu-cu oh, **kλŋ=ri** **t̥u-pλ** **ya=tse=tse** khi mlaŋcha-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) “tλ lo-to”, pi-tse lλ-tse, **khim=ko=tse** ten λle  
become do-IMP say-CVB do-CVB **3PL=DEF=ERG** then like.this  
sλrap piin-mi  
curse give-EVID  
'Saying “Become like this!”, they made the curse.'
- (7) **sro=tse** “khλ ki a-khλ” pi-tse, cu: u, a-khλ-pλ 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 **unmarked 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.CVB **village-GEN person-PL=ERG**  
te kê-tjin  
remove come.home-PST

‘Having returned to the village, the villagers sent me packing (again).’

- (9) ηê: the-cuke tho-ne a-tjhur-ce  
1SG.INCL.GEN sibling-PL meet-INF NEG-able-PFCT.CVB  
**ηê: cawe lama=ce** ηânkê-tjin  
**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 tã teno khetipati læ-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 through 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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