NEPA LI AS AN ERGATIVE LANGUAGE
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1. WHAT IS AN ERGATIVE LANGUAGE?

The definition of ergativity that I'm adopting is a broad one, outlined by Bernard Comrie in "The Ergative: Variations on a Theme." It applies to such widely scattered languages as Chuckchee (Siberia), Basque, Walbiri (Australia), Veynakhian, and Georgian—to languages which are divergent from one another genetically and typologically. The following are characteristics of ergative languages:

1.1 The subject of an intransitive verb and the direct object of a transitive verb get the same mark (which may be -s, as in Basque). In the paper this will be called the patient and its case the "nominative." There is no "accusative" case.

1.2 The subject (or agent) of a transitive verb gets a different mark; its case is the "ergative." (The ergative mark is often the same as the instrumental mark.)

Beyond these two characteristics, variation among ergative languages is considerable.

1.3 Some ergative languages don't have passive constructions; some, such as Georgian, do.

1.4 Some, such as Georgian and Punjabi, mark ergative noun phrases only with certain forms of the verb, with certain tenses or aspects; others mark them throughout.

1.5 In some ergative languages, Punjabi for example, the verb agrees only with the nominative marked patient noun phrase, never with the ergative marked one. In others, the verb agrees with its subject, and a subject may be in the ergative case.

2. SOME FACTS ABOUT NEPALI

Nepali is an Indo-Aryan language spoken in Nepal by approximately four million people. It has been for 800 years in close contact with languages of the Tibeto-Burman family, both the Bodish and the Himalayan branches. While there is considerable
dialect variation in Nepali, the language as spoken in Kathmandu, the capital, is becoming standardized. It is, according to Edward Bendix, "considered by some to be artificial or pundit speech, and differs more or less sharply from native speakers colloquial, depending on education, caste-clan group and geographical region." The characterization of bahun chetrik-kura (the speech of the Brahmans and Chetris) as a "language of the written word" is warmly denied, however, by T.W. Clark. Whatever the accuracy of the characterization, Kathmandu Nepali is the primary data upon which this paper is based. My informant was Tulasi Uprait, who grew up in East Nepal and was educated in Kathmandu. In addition, I made considerable use of data from the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Clause, Sentence, and Discourse Patterns in Selected Languages of Nepal, and from Clark's Introduction to Nepali, both of which are based on the speech of the capital. The material from the latter two sources was always checked with Mr. Uprait, and any differences in judgment are noted in the paper.

Nepali possesses many features of ergativity, chief among them being the ergative case marker "-le", which is used to mark the subject of a transitive verb. The following three sentences may be freely translated "I sneezed."

(1) mxy-je hachū-le ayo.
   I-to sneeze came-pst,3s
   A sneeze came to me.
(2) mxy-je hachū-je gxrė.
   I-by sneeze did-pst,1s
   I did a sneeze.
(3) mxy-je hachū-le exthayo.
   I-to sneeze-by suffer-c-pst,3s
   A sneeze caused me to suffer.

Though "hachū" in (1) is the subject of an intransitive verb and in (2) is the object of a transitive verb, in both sentences it is in the same unmarked case—the nominative. Sentence (3),
however, is framed in such a way that "hachuw" is the agent (the sentence is causative); and it is marked with the ergative postposition.

What follows is an overview of some features of ergativity in Nepali. The last two (2.6 and 2.7) are somewhat problematical.

2.1. The agent of a transitive verb takes the ergative case postposition "-le."

2.2. There is no accusative case. The direct object of a transitive verb, like the sole argument or subject of an intransitive verb, is in the nominative case—unmarked in Nepali.

2.3. The ergative postposition is the same as the instrumental postposition:

(4) lxthi-le mxy-le sisi phuTae.

stick-by l-by bottle broke-pst,1s

I broke the bottle with a stick.

2.4. Nepali possesses a passive.

2.5. The verb in Nepali agrees with its subject noun phrase, whether it is in the nominative or in the ergative case.

2.6. The morphological identification of subjects of intransitive verbs with objects of transitive verbs is only partial in Nepali—it works for inanimate noun phrases (non subject, non object); but not for animate ones (non subject, -lay object). Animate direct objects of transitive verbs are frequently (though not always) marked with the dative or goal postposition "-lay"; pronominal direct objects are always marked with "-lay." This perhaps weakens Nepali's claim to ergative status.

2.7. In Nepali, as in Georgian and Punjabi, the ergative postposition appears only with certain forms of the verb, in certain tenses or aspects. A large part of this paper will be a report of my attempt to describe the distribution of the 'le'marker with respect to the verb morphology.
3. THE PATIENT

One way to look at the phenomenon of transitivity is to say that the presence of a direct object or patient noun phrase triggers the appearance of the ergative marker on the subject or agent noun phrase. However, we find many sentences in Nepali where there exists an ergative marked noun phrase and no patient noun phrase at all. I'll consider these direct objectless sentences to be the result of two kinds of deletion -- indefinite and anaphoric.

Indefinite or unspecified objects are frequently deleted in Nepali (as they are in English).

(5) mxy-le khāe.
    I-by eat-pst, ls
    I ate (something).

(6) Hxri-le khělyo.
    Hari-by play-pst, 3s
    Hari played (something).

Often an object may be deleted anaphorically, because it's been previously mentioned in the discourse.

(7) dāi gx̂r-da, sanu khet xthxba thor-xi dhan chx bhx̂m-e
    threshing do-ca, small field or little-em rice be-pr, 3s
    manis-le matr-xi gx̂r-chxn. (NT p. 38, 17)
    say-perc people-by only-em do-pr, 3pl

When they are (do) threshing, if there is only a small field, or only a small quantity of rice, only people do (it).

The patient "threshing" (dāi-) which appears at the beginning of the sentence is deleted anaphorically at the end, though it triggers the appearance of "-le" on "people" (manis-le).

In addition to direct objects which are single nouns, sentential direct objects also occur and serve to trigger "-le."

(8) ...kancha chora-le a-erx bhx̂niō: xghi-ko misrī bhx̂n-da
    ...youngest son-by come-sa say-pst,es: before-of sugar say-ca
ta io misri jiad-xi mTho rx̂e-chxn. (NT p. 15, 6)
    att this sugar much-em nice remain-pr, 3s
    ...the youngest son came and said, "This sugar lump is much