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# Split Ergativity in Nepali and Its Typological Significance

Chao Li\*

## 1 Introduction

In terms of case marking, a language can be classified as morphologically ergative if the case on intransitive subjects is the same as that on objects, but different from that on transitive subjects. On the other hand, a language can be viewed as morphologically accusative if the case on intransitive subjects is the same as that on transitive subjects, but different from that on objects. Following Dixon (1979, 1994), I use A, O and S to refer to transitive subjects, objects, and intransitive subjects, respectively. So in an ergative language S and O pattern together, contrasting with A, while in an accusative language S and A group together, contrasting with O.

Many languages show a mixture of ergative and accusative case marking strategies. According to Dixon (1994), the splits can be conditioned by one or more of the following factors: (i) the semantic nature of the verb, (ii) the semantic nature of the core NPs, (iii) tense and/or aspect and/or mood choice of the clause, and (iv) main/subordinate status of the clause.

Nepali is often claimed to be an ergative language (e.g. Abadie 1974), "an ergative type of language" (Verma 1992), or a split-ergative language (e.g. Klaiman 1987, Masica 1991). Furthermore, it is often assumed that the ergative domain in Nepali gets extended, with the case marker on A used not only in the original perfective domain but also in the imperfective domain (e.g. Masica 1991). Although there are numerous descriptions and discussions concerning the use and distribution of the cases on A, O, and S (e.g. Abdulky 1974; Clark 1963; Pradhan 1982; Wallace 1982, 1985), to my best knowledge, no systemic synchronic study of the case marking pattern in Nepali with respect to ergativity has been conducted.

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\*Data used in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, is from my elicitation with three native speakers of Nepali, Samrita Lohani, Soni Mulmi and Kesang Sherpa, all of whom are from Kathmandu. I appreciate their time and patience. I am also grateful to Steve Anderson, Masha Babyonyshev, Dianne Jonas, Larry Horn, Dasha Kavitskaya, Julie Legate, and the audiences at the 30<sup>th</sup> PLC for their valuable comments.

Throughout the paper, the IPA is used to transcribe the examples. The following abbreviations are used in the glosses: F=feminine, Fut=future tense, Hab=habitual, Imperf=imperfect participle marker, Inf=Infinitive, M=masculine, Perf=perfect participle marker, Pres=Present tense.

Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to see to what extent Nepali is an ergative language.<sup>1</sup> I argue that contrary to the usual characterization of Nepali as an ergative language or a split-ergative language conditioned solely by tense/aspect, the language in fact shows a more complex case-marking pattern. Furthermore, I show that Nepali is a split-ergative language conditioned by the semantic nature of NPs. In the domain of inanimate NPs, the language is ergative; elsewhere, neither ergative nor accusative is appropriately applicable. I argue that this finding is of typological significance in that it provides a good example for a rare split between inanimate NPs and animate NPs.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the case marking on subjects and objects. Section 3 discusses whether Nepali is a (split-) ergative language. The final section summarizes the main points made in the paper.

## 2 Case Marking on Subjects and Objects in Nepali

### 2.1 Case Marking on Subjects

As shown in (1-2), *le* can be used to mark transitive and intransitive subjects in Nepali. The sentences in (1-2) also show that in Nepali the verb agrees with the subject in person, number and gender, with the last category being relevant only for third-person singular nouns.

- (1) mɔi-\*(le) pauroʃi kaʃ-ẽ.  
 I-le bread cut-Past.1Sg.  
 'I cut the bread.'
- (2) a. keʃa-(le) dʰerai dɔgʊr-eko tsʰɔ.  
 boy-le much run-Perf Pres.3Sg.M.  
 'The boy has run a lot.'
- b. keʃi-(le) dʰerai dɔgʊr-eki tsʰe.  
 girl-le much run-Perf Pres.3Sg.F.  
 'The girl has run a lot.'

The sentence in (3) shows that in addition to marking animate subjects, *le* can also be used to mark inanimate transitive subjects. The subject status

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper, I will restrict my attention to case marking in main clauses; as a result, I will not discuss whether there is a split in Nepali conditioned by the main/subordinate status of the clause.

of 'stones' in (3) can be established by the fact that, like the sentences in (1-2), the verb in (3) agrees with the NP marked with *le* in person and number.

- (3) d<sup>h</sup>uŋga-horu-\*(le) dz<sup>h</sup>jal p<sup>h</sup>uṭa-e.  
 stone-Pl-le window break-Past.3Pl.  
 'The stones broke the window.'

Although *le* can be used on both animate and inanimate transitive subjects, its use on animate transitive subjects is sensitive to tense and aspect, and its use on inanimate transitive subjects is not. For example, the sentence in (1) is in the simple past tense, and *le* in it is obligatory. On the other hand, as shown in (4), *le* becomes optional when the sentence is in the present progressive tense.<sup>2</sup>

- (4) mdi-(le) pauroṭi kaṭ-dbi-ts<sup>h</sup>u.  
 I-le bread cut-Imperf-Pres.1Sg.  
 'I am cutting the bread.'

In more general terms, among the eight tenses I examined—the simple present tense, the present progressive tense, the past progressive tense, the past habitual tense, the simple future tense, the simple past tense, the present perfect tense, and the past perfect tense, the use of *le* on animate transitive subjects is optional in the first five tenses, which form the imperfective domain, but obligatory in the last three tenses, which constitute the perfective domain.

In contrast to the use of *le* on animate transitive subjects, its use on inanimate transitive subjects is invariably obligatory. We have seen from (3) that *le* is obligatory in the simple past tense and in the perfective aspect. As shown in (5), when (3) changes from the perfective aspect to the imperfective aspect, *le* is still obligatory because the NP marked with it is inanimate.

- (5) d<sup>h</sup>uŋga-horu-\*(le) dz<sup>h</sup>jal p<sup>h</sup>uṭa-dbi-ts<sup>h</sup>ɔn.  
 stone-Pl-le window break-Imperf-Pres.3Pl.  
 'The stones are breaking the window.'

So far, we have been mainly concerned with the use of *le* on transitive subjects. As for its use on intransitive subjects, it varies according to verbs.

<sup>2</sup>In this study, I treat as being optional both the cases of "being better with a certain case marker" and the cases of "being better without the case marker".

No case marker can be used on S when the verb is unaccusative; however, when the verb is unergative, the use of *le* varies.

Specifically, the verbs in (6) and those in (7) are originally proposed by Perlmutter (1978) to be unaccusative and unergative, respectively.

(6) Unaccusative verbs

- a. Verbs whose sole argument is semantically a patient: p<sup>h</sup>ulnu 'bloom'; lɔdzaunu 'blush'; umlɔnu 'boil'; p<sup>h</sup>uʈnu 'break'; dzɔlnu 'burn'; pɔdʒkanu 'burst, explode'; bɔdɔlnu/p<sup>h</sup>ɛrnu 'change, alter'; b<sup>f</sup>ɔtkinu 'collapse'; g<sup>f</sup>ɔʈnu 'decrease'; mɔrnu 'die'; g<sup>f</sup>ɔlnu 'dissolve'; tɔptapaunu 'drip'; k<sup>h</sup>ɔsnu 'drop'; suknu 'dry'; k<sup>h</sup>ɔsnu 'fall'; sɔdʒnu 'ferment'; tɔirɔnu 'float'; bɔgnu 'flow'; dzɔmnu 'freeze'; umrɔnu 'germinate, sprout'; nib<sup>f</sup>nu 'go out (fire)'; bɔdnu 'grow'; bɔd<sup>f</sup>nu 'increase'; tsuinu 'leak'; palʈɔnu 'lie'; pɔglinu 'melt'; k<sup>h</sup>ulnu 'open'; paknu 'ripen'; udaunu/dz<sup>f</sup>ulkɔnu 'rise'; guɔnu 'roll'; kuhunu 'rot'; p<sup>h</sup>idzinu 'scatter, disperse'; ɔstaunu 'set (sun)'; hɔllɔnu 'shake'; ʈukrijɔnu 'shatter'; k<sup>h</sup>umtɔnu 'shrink'; dʒubnu 'sink'; tsiplɔnu 'slip'; b<sup>f</sup>idznu 'soak'; dzɔmnu 'solidify'; pok<sup>h</sup>nu 'spill'; g<sup>f</sup>umnu 'spin'; tsirnu 'split'; hɔllinu 'sway, swing'; suninu 'swell'; kamnu/kapnu 'tremble'; k<sup>h</sup>iinu 'wear out'; oilinu 'wither, wilt';
- b. Verbs of existing and happening: p<sup>h</sup>ɔlnu 'ensue';
- c. Verbs indicating non-voluntary emission of stimuli: bɔlnu (fire) /ʈɔlkɔnu/tsɔmkɔnu 'glow, glisten, glitter, shine'; lagnu (sun) 'shine'; gɔnaunu 'stink'; tsɔmkɔnu 'twinkle';
- d. Verbs which are aspectual predicates: tunginu/roknu 'cease'; sɔkkɛnu 'end'; roknu 'stop';
- e. Verbs which are duratives: k<sup>h</sup>ɔpnu/tɔrnu 'last'; bɔsnu 'stay';
- f. Others: aipugnu 'arrive'; aunu 'come'; b<sup>f</sup>agnu 'flee'; dzanu 'go'; hurkɔnu 'grow up'; tsɔlnu 'move'; bitnu 'pass (time)'; p<sup>h</sup>ɔrkɔnu 'return'; ub<sup>f</sup>inu 'stand'.

(7) Unergative verbs

- a. Verbs describing .willed or volitional acts: nuhaunu 'bathe'; mǎgnu 'beg'; dɔgnu 'bow'; ʈ<sup>h</sup>ɔgnu 'cheat'; g<sup>f</sup>ɔsrɔnu 'crawl'; natsnu 'dance'; dzud<sup>f</sup>nu 'fight'; uɔnu 'fly'; tsɔrnu 'graze'; d<sup>f</sup>ɔʈnu 'lie'; sunnu 'listen'; hernu 'look'; dzɔpnu 'meditate'; k<sup>h</sup>ɛlnu

- 'play'; prar<sup>h</sup>ona 'pray'; badznu 'quarrel'; pɔdɔnu 'read'; dɔgurnu 'run'; gaunu 'sing'; t<sup>h</sup>uknu 'spit'; āk<sup>h</sup>atɔrnu 'stare'; pɔudɔnu 'swim'; sotsnu 'think'; hīdɔnu 'walk';
- b. Verbs indicating manner of speaking or describing sounds made by human being and/or animals: b<sup>h</sup>uknu 'bark'; dɔkɔrɔnu 'bellow'; basnu 'crow'; konnu 'groan'; hīlinu 'neigh'; gardzɔnu 'roar'; kɔraunu 'shout';
- c. Verbs describing certain involuntary bodily processes: dɔkarnu 'belch'; k<sup>h</sup>oknu 'cough'; runu 'cry'; tsilaunu 'itch'; hāsnu 'laugh'; sutnu 'sleep'; g<sup>h</sup>urnu 'snore'; ts<sup>h</sup>adnu 'vomit'; tsīknu 'sneeze'.

Interestingly, subjects of the verbs in (6) are never marked with *le* or with any other postpositions. The three speakers' judgments in this respect are uniform. For example, in (8), the subject of 'fall', namely 'Ram', is unmarked in all tenses/aspects.

- (8) a. Ram-(\*le) sɔd<sup>h</sup>āi k<sup>h</sup>ɔs-ts<sup>h</sup>ɔ. (Simple present tense)  
Ram-le always fall-Pres.3Sg.M.  
'Ram always falls down.'
- b. Ram-(\*le) k<sup>h</sup>ɔs-dɔi-ts<sup>h</sup>ɔ. (Present progressive tense)  
Ram-le fall-Imperf-Pres.3Sg.M.  
'Ram is falling down.'
- c. Ram-(\*le) k<sup>h</sup>ɔs-dɔi-t<sup>h</sup>ijɔ. (Past progressive tense)  
Ram-le fall-Imperf-Past.3Sg.M.  
'Ram was falling down.'
- d. Ram-(\*le) k<sup>h</sup>ɔs-t<sup>h</sup>ijɔ. (Past habitual tense)  
Ram-le fall-Past.Hab.3Sg.M.  
'Ram used to fall.'
- e. Ram-(\*le) k<sup>h</sup>ɔs-la. (Simple future tense)  
Ram-le fall-Fut.3Sg.  
'Ram will fall.'
- f. Ram-(\*le) k<sup>h</sup>ɔs-jo. (Simple past tense)  
Ram-le fall-Past.3Sg.M.  
'Ram fell down.'
- g. Ram-(\*le) k<sup>h</sup>ɔs-eko ts<sup>h</sup>ɔ. (Present perfect tense)  
Ram-le fall-Perf Pres.3Sg.M.  
'Ram has fallen down.'

- h. Ram-\*(le) k<sup>h</sup>ɔs-eko t<sup>h</sup>ijo. (Past perfect tense)  
 Ram-le fall-Perf Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram had fallen down.'

In contrast to the case marking on subjects of all the verbs in (6), the case marking on subjects of the verbs in (7) varies according to verbs, tenses/aspects, and even speakers. Subjects of some verbs (e.g. *hernu* 'look') have to be marked in all tenses/aspects as in (9), but subjects of some other verbs (e.g. *natsnu* 'dance') are optional in some tense(s) (e.g. simple past tense) but obligatory in some other tense(s) (e.g. present perfect tense), as shown in (10).

- (9) a. (Simple present tense)  
 Ram-\*(le) sɔd<sup>h</sup>ai hosijarpurvok her-ts<sup>h</sup>ɔ.  
 Ram-le always carefully look-Pres.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram always looks carefully.'
- b. (Present progressive tense)  
 Ram-\*(le) hosijarpurvok her-dɔi-ts<sup>h</sup>ɔ.  
 Ram-le carefully look-Imperf-Pres.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram is looking carefully.'
- c. (Past progressive tense)  
 Ram-\*(le) hosijarpurvok her-dɔi-t<sup>h</sup>ijo.  
 Ram-le carefully look-Imperf-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram was looking carefully.'
- d. (Past habitual tense)  
 Ram-\*(le) hosijarpurvok her-t<sup>h</sup>jo.  
 Ram-le carefully look-Past.Hab.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram used to look carefully.'
- e. (Simple future tense)  
 Ram-\*(le) hosijarpurvok her-la.  
 Ram-le carefully look-Fut.3Sg.  
 'Ram will look carefully.'
- f. (Simple past tense)  
 Ram-\*(le) hosijarpurvok her-jo.  
 Ram-le carefully look-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram looked carefully.'
- g. (Present perfect tense)  
 Ram-\*(le) hosijarpurvok her-eko ts<sup>h</sup>ɔ.  
 Ram-le carefully look-Perf Pres.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram has looked carefully.'



- h. (Past perfect tense)  
 Ram-\*(le) hosijarpurvok her-eko t<sup>h</sup>ijo.  
 Ram-le carefully look-Perf Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram had looked carefully.'
- (10) a. (Simple past tense)  
 Ram-(le) ek g<sup>f</sup>ɔnʈa ɔgadjɪ nats-jo.  
 Ram-le one hour before dance-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram danced an hour ago.'
- b. (Present perfect tense)  
 Ram-\*(le) d<sup>f</sup>eri nats-eko ts<sup>h</sup>ɔ.  
 Ram-le much dance-Perf Pres.3Sg.M.  
 'Ram has danced a lot.'

Furthermore, for the same verb in the same tense/aspect, speakers' judgments about the use of *le* on unergative subjects sometimes differ. Take *k<sup>h</sup>elnu* 'play' as an example. When it is used in the simple present tense, one speaker told me that *le* cannot be used on its subject, but the other two speakers said that the *le* marker is optional, but it is better without it.

In any case, the crucial difference between the verbs in (6) and those in (7) is that subjects of the verbs in (6) can never be marked, but subjects of almost all the verbs in (7) can be marked with *le* at least in the perfective domain. I said "almost all" because there are two verbs in (7) whose subjects cannot be marked with *le* in all the tenses/aspects for all the three informants mentioned in the acknowledgement note. These two verbs are italicized in (7); they are *uɕnu* 'fly' and *runu* 'cry'. However, when I compared the data elicited from these three consultants with the data elicited from another informant, Avidit Acharya, I found that Avidit regarded the use of *le* on the subject of 'fly' as being obligatory in present and past perfect tenses, and viewed its use on the subject of 'cry' as being possible but better without it in the same two tenses. This consultant was born in the U.S., and his family was originally from Tɔnɔhū, a city west of Kathmandu. He said that he basically learned Nepali from his grandmother. On the assumption that the consultant's background does not affect his being a native speaker of Nepali, it is very likely that the difference between his judgments and those of the three speakers whose data is used in this paper is due to regional or dialectal variation. However, what is crucial for our purpose is that this consultant makes the same distinction between unaccusative verbs and unergative verbs in terms of case marking. Therefore, when all the data from the four speakers is taken together, we can conclude that subjects of unaccusative verbs can never be marked with a postposition in all tenses/aspects for all speakers, and

that subjects of unergative verbs can be marked with *le* in at least the perfective domain for at least some speakers.

To summarize, the use of *le* on inanimate transitive subjects is obligatory, but its use on animate transitive subjects varies according to tense/aspect. In the perfective domain, *le* on the A argument is obligatory; in the imperfective domain, the use of *le* is optional. As for the use of *le* on intransitive subjects, it varies according to verbs. No case marker can be used on S when the verb is unaccusative. However, when the verb is unergative, the use of *le* is at least possible in the perfective domain for at least some speakers.

## 2.2 Case Marking on Objects

The overt object case marker in Nepali is *lai*. As shown in (11-15), *lai* can be used on the O argument of a monotransitive verb only when O is either both animate and specific or socially important. The sentences in (11) show that inanimate nouns cannot be marked with *lai* even when the noun is definite. The sentences in (12-13) demonstrate that *lai* is disallowed when O is neither a specific nor a socially important animate being, and that it is optional when O is not a proper noun or a pronoun, but a common noun denoting a specific animate being. The sentences in (14-15) show that *lai* is obligatory when O is a proper noun or a pronoun referring to an animate being.

- (11) (Definite)  
 hidzo Ram-le tjo sikka-(\*lai) dek<sup>h</sup>-jo.  
 yesterday Ram-le that coin-lai see-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Yesterday Ram saw that coin.'
- (12) a. (Non-specific)  
 hidzo Ram-le tsɔra-(\*lai) dek<sup>h</sup>-no tsah-jo.  
 yesterday Ram-le bird-lai see-Inf want-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Yesterday Ram wanted to see a bird.'
- b. (Specific)  
 hidzo Ram-le tsɔra-(lai) dek<sup>h</sup>-no tsah-jo.  
 yesterday Ram-le bird-lai see-Inf want-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Yesterday Ram wanted to see a bird.'
- (13) a. (Non-specific; not socially important)  
 hidzo Ram-le daktɔr-hɔru-(\*lai) dek<sup>h</sup>-no  
 yesterday Ram-le doctor-Pl-lai see-Inf  
 tsah-jo.  
 want-Past.3Sg.M.

'Yesterday Ram wanted to see doctors.'

b. (Specific)

hidzo Ram-le daktor-horu-(lai) dek<sup>h</sup>-no  
 yesterday Ram-le doctor-Pl-lai see-Inf  
 tsah-jo.  
 want-Past.3Sg.M.

'Yesterday Ram wanted to see doctors.'

(14) (Definite)

hidzo Ram-le Seti-\*(lai) dek<sup>h</sup>-jo.  
 yesterday Ram-le Seti-lai see-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Yesterday Ram saw Seti.'

(15) (Definite)

hidzo Ram-le me-\*(lai) dek<sup>h</sup>-jo  
 yesterday Ram-le me-lai see-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'Yesterday Ram saw me.'

Since the referent of 'me' (as in (15)) must be animate (and so must be the referent of 'you'), they are marked with *-lai* in Nepali when used as the direct object of a monotransitive verb. However, as we know, 'it' (and 'them') in English can refer to both animate beings and inanimate things. The question is how 'it' is rendered in Nepali and how it is marked when used as direct object.

'It' is rendered as *tjo* in Nepali, which is a demonstrative pronoun meaning 'that'. *Tjo* can refer to both animate beings and inanimate things. When it refers to inanimate entities, *tjo* is not case-marked when used as direct object, as shown in (16a). However, as shown in (16b), when it refers to animate beings, *tjo* must be marked with *-lai* and change to *tjɔs-lai* or *tes-lai*. Therefore, when used as direct object, pronouns referring to animate beings must be marked with *-lai* and pronouns denoting inanimate entities must not.

(16) a. tjo keʈa-le tjo lek<sup>h</sup>-jo.  
 that boy-le it write-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'The boy wrote it.'

b. tjo keʈa-le tjɔs-lai/tes-lai mar-jo.  
 that boy-le it-lai kill-Past.3Sg.M.  
 'The boy killed it.'

In sum, the use of *lai* on the O argument of a monotransitive verb is largely conditioned by animacy and specificity. When the O argument is a proper noun or a pronoun referring to an animate being, the *lai* marker is

obligatory. When the O argument is inanimate, no overt case marker can be used. And when the O argument is animate and specific, but is neither a proper noun nor a pronoun, the *lai* marker is optional.<sup>3</sup>

### 3 Split Ergativity in Nepali

#### 3.1 Nepali as a Split-Ergative Language Conditioned by the Semantic Nature of NPs

After describing the use of *le* and *lai* in section 2, we are now in a position to answer the question of whether Nepali is a (split-)ergative language. To better achieve this goal, I summarize the case marking on A, O and S in Table 1 on the next page.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 shows that Nepali is obviously not a fully ergative language. This is simply because neither transitive subjects, objects, nor intransitive subjects are marked uniformly. It is natural, then, to ask whether Nepali is a split-ergative language conditioned by some semantic factor(s).

First, let's consider whether Nepali is a split-ergative language conditioned by tense/aspect. To resolve this issue, it needs to be pointed out that ergativity is determined by how the case markers on A, O, and S pattern with each other. When we take into account all the case-marking patterns on A, O, and S shown in Table 1, it can be seen that Nepali cannot be classified as a simple split-ergative language conditioned by tense/aspect. On the one hand, Nepali is neither a fully ergative language nor a fully accusative language in the imperfective domain. In fact, because of the variability and optionality of the case marking on A, O, and S, Nepali resists classification as ergative or accusative in this domain. On the other hand, even in the perfective domain Nepali cannot be classified as purely ergative or accusative because of the variability and optionality of the case marking on O and S.

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<sup>3</sup>When there is an indirect object, the O argument of a ditransitive verb has to be left unmarked. In this case, the indirect object has to be marked with *lai*.

<sup>4</sup>Note that in Table 1 I ignore the case-marking pattern with ditransitive verbs (see note 3). Moreover, in all the tenses except the simple present tense, the sum of the percentages of the three types of marking on subjects of the forty-one unergative verbs listed in (7) is not 100% because there are some verbs that cannot be decided for the reason of different judgments given by the three informants—Kesang, Samrita and Soni.

	A--- <i>-le</i>		S--- <i>-le</i>				O--- <i>-lai</i>			
	A n i m a t e	I n a n i m a t e	Unac- cu- sative		Unergative	Animate			I n a n i m a t e	
			A n i m a t e	I n a n i m a t e		proper name or pro- noun	specific but neither proper name nor pro- noun	neither specific nor so- cially important		
Simple present tense	(le)	le	φ	φ	φ: 30% (le): 65% le: 5%	lai	(lai)	φ	φ	
Present progressive tense	(le)	le	φ	φ	φ: 24.4% (le): 61% le: 12.1%	lai	(lai)	φ	φ	
Past progressive tense	(le)	le	φ	φ	φ: 17.1% (le): 61.3% le: 9.8%	lai	(lai)	φ	φ	
Past habitual tense	(le)	le	φ	φ	φ: 14.6% (le): 51.2% le: 14.6%	lai	(lai)	φ	φ	
Simple future tense	(le)	le	φ	φ	φ: 15.8% (le): 34.2% le: 36.8%	lai	(lai)	φ	φ	
Simple past tense	le	le	φ	φ	φ: 12.5% (le): 30% le: 37.5%	lai	(lai)	φ	φ	
Present perfect tense	le	le	φ	φ	φ: 4.9% (le): 19.5% le: 51.2%	lai	(lai)	φ	φ	
Past perfect tense	le	le	φ	φ	φ: 4.9% (le): 24.4% le: 41.5%	lai	(lai)	φ	φ	

Table 1. Case Marking on A, S and O in Nepali

Next, let's examine whether Nepali is a split-ergative language conditioned by the semantic nature of the verb. Table 1 shows that Nepali

cannot be classified as a simple split-ergative language conditioned by the semantic nature of the verb either, although there is a distinction between unergative and unaccusative verbs with respect to the case marking on S. This is because in the imperfective domain the case marker on A is optional and the case marking on O shows variability and optionality. As for the perfective domain, the fact that the case marking on O shows the same variability and optionality again makes it difficult to classify Nepali as a split-ergative language conditioned solely by the semantic nature of the verb.

After discussing the possibilities of a split conditioned by tense/aspect and a split conditioned by the semantic nature of verbs, we are left with the task of considering whether Nepali is a split-ergative language conditioned by the semantic nature of NPs. As Table 1 shows, animate objects are marked variably, which makes it inappropriate to classify Nepali as ergative or accusative in this domain. However, in the inanimate domain, Nepali can be argued to show full ergativity. In this domain, inanimate transitive subjects are marked with *le*, and inanimate objects are unmarked. Then the crucial question is how inanimate intransitive subjects are case-marked. In section 2 we have mentioned that unaccusative verbs are always unmarked and unergative verbs can be marked with *le* in at least some tense(s) and for at least some speakers. It is worth noting that although some unaccusative verbs like *aipugnu* 'arrive' allow both animate and inanimate subjects, all unergative verbs investigated here only allow animate subjects. Therefore, when we consider inanimate subjects of intransitive verbs, only unaccusative verbs are relevant. Since subjects of unaccusative verbs are always unmarked, it follows that all inanimate intransitive subjects are always unmarked. In turn, it follows that in the inanimate domain Nepali is fully ergative because in this domain both S and O are unmarked and A is marked with *le*.

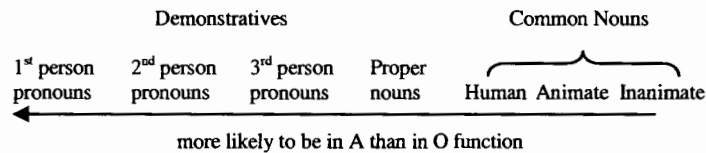
Based on the above discussions, we can conclude that, contrary to earlier characterizations of Nepali either as a fully ergative language (Abadie 1974) or a split-ergative language solely conditioned by tense/aspect (Kachru & Pandharipande 1978, Klaiman 1987), the language in fact shows a more complex case-marking pattern than previously assumed. Furthermore, it can be concluded that Nepali is a split-ergative language conditioned by the semantic nature of NPs. In the domain of inanimate NPs, the language is ergative; elsewhere, neither ergative nor accusative is properly applicable.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Although Table 1 excludes the case-marking pattern with respect to ditransitive verbs, our conclusion would still hold if we took ditransitive verbs into consideration. Because the O argument of a ditransitive verb has to be left unmarked (see note 3), the inanimate O argument of a ditransitive verb is unmarked. This fact conforms not only to our generalization that inanimate O arguments are not case-marked, but also to our conclusion that Nepali is ergative in the domain of inanimate NPs. In addition,

### 3.2 Typological Significance

Our finding that Nepali shows a split between animate and inanimate NPs with respect to case marking is of typological significance. In theory, the split in a split-ergative language conditioned by the semantic nature of NPs can be formed at any point along Dixon (1979, 1994)'s Nominal Hierarchy in (17).

(17) Nominal Hierarchy (Dixon 1994:85)



However, as DeLancey (1981) points out, the majority of attested splits follow either the (1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup>) > 3<sup>rd</sup> pattern or the pattern of pronouns > full NPs. As for the other patterns, they are attested "only rarely". In this respect, Nepali is typologically significant in that it shows a rare split pattern, namely animate NPs > inanimate NPs.

## 4 Summary

In this paper, I argued that in terms of case marking, Nepali is neither a fully ergative language nor a simple split-ergative language conditioned by tense/aspect. This is because Nepali shows a more complex case-marking pattern than previously assumed.

Moreover, I demonstrated that Nepali is a split-ergative language conditioned by the semantic nature of NPs. In the domain of inanimate NPs, the language is ergative; elsewhere, neither ergative nor accusative is readily applicable. This finding is typologically significant in that it provides a good example for a relatively rare split between inanimate NPs and other NPs.

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the fact that animate O arguments of ditransitive verbs are unmarked only adds complexity to the case marking in the animate domain, and provides further support for our conclusion that Nepali resists classification as ergative or accusative in this domain.

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